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When Relief Aid Becomes Counterproductive: A study of Intervention in the Congo (2007-2008)

by Marc-Andre Lagrange

Conventional wisdom assumes that insurgencies can be suppressed through the introduction of money and humanitarian assistance into a conflict region. Sometimes, these efforts are counterproductive. Sometimes, the more aid and assistance an external actor introduces, the more the situation is complicated. This essay will describe one such example through my own observations as a humanitarian assistance worker in the Congo from 2007-2008. The purpose of this essay is to describe when humanitarian assistance is counterproductive and introduce a model to assist practitioners working in similar environments.

As mentioned in FMI 3-07.22, Counterinsurgency, "preferred methods of support are through assistance and development programs. [...] Direct support (not involving combat operations) involves the use of US forces providing direct assistance to the HN civilian populace or military."¹ In population centric COIN, grand objectives evolved from restoring State legitimacy through HN state infrastructures capacity to HN state capacity to protect civilian population. Humanitarian action objectives are to protect civilian population and incapacitated combatants from war. Despite having two different objectives, both humanitarian action and COIN operations share protection of civilian as an end. Therefore, it is assumed that delivering relief aid and providing humanitarian assistance to civilian population participates to restore HN State legitimacy. But just like a misuse of military power might be counterproductive, mismanagement of humanitarian aid might undermine state legitimacy and participate to alienate host nation populace against international community and fuel insurgency. By analyzing and modeling the Internally Displaced Populations, host populations, armed groups and relief agencies actions rational and relief aid management in North Kivu province of Democratic republic of Congo, this article aims to identify the sociological mechanisms taking place between IDPs and host communities which participate to undermine COIN operations.

From August 2006 to end 2009, nearly half a million of individuals were displaced in Northern Kivu due to the conflict between the Kinshasa government and the Conseil National du Peuple (CNDP). In order to mitigate the expansion of CNDP, the Congolese authorities, with the support of MONUC, intended to restrict the conflict to the territories of Masisi and Rutshuru. Historically, preventive displacements from "urban" areas to the bush are traditional protection mechanisms in DRC. In that particular case, this option was denied to the populations by CNDP which was mainly occupying rural areas. But after welcoming a first flow of displaced population in the neighborhood of Goma, the Congolese authorities quickly restricted IDP access to the city. Civilian population found themselves soon trapped in a buffer zone between the FARDC on South and CNDP on North and West. Possibility was still given to them to flee to Uganda and Rwanda. But because of the complex nature of the conflicts in the region and its

¹ FMI 3-07.22; Introduction, counterinsurgency description; type of support; p 8.

politico-ethnic bases, most of the populations choose to stay in DRC. Trapped in a geographically limited domain bordering the front line, populations fleeing the combats had no option but to cohabite with host populations. In less than 6 month, during 2007, the locality of Rutshuru saw its population grow from nearly 10 000 inhabitants to 30 000 inhabitants.

In order to respond timely and actively to the high vulnerability of the displaced population, the United Nations, through OCHA and UNICEF initiated the Rapid response Mechanism (RRM). This joint action of 2 UN agencies, implemented by several international NGO, aimed to deliver humanitarian aid and conduct needs assessments to IDP point of displacement within 2 days. In regard to the scale of the humanitarian crises, it is worse to recognize that the RRM was a successful action. But the violence done to IDP, INGO by host population, local authorities and all parties' armed forces impose to give a critical look at this crises management by the international community.

A forced cohabitation

According to anthropologist Elikia M'Bokolo, "individual or collective displacements, sometime whole villages, eventually on another colonial power territory²" were protection/resistance practices from civilian during Belgian colonial times. Chosen displacement as a protective mechanism is therefore not new phenomena in DRC but what was "new" in 2008/2009, is the scale and its consequences for all civilian populations, displaced and host. During the first Kivu wars, in 1996 and 1998, major part of the population was force to flee military strategic objectives such as urban areas. Displacement was not chosen and initiated by Kabila forces supported by the Rwandan army. But war end was the end of Mobutu regime, civilians were not targeted and displacement was an effective protection mechanism.

The conflict initiated by CNDP was different in as civilians were the objective. Both victim and legitimacy source for all parties of the conflict, population were basically hold hostage by the various belligerents. Despite claiming national ambitions, Laurent Nkunda retrained its action to the Rutshuru and Masisi territories. For strategic considerations, the core confrontation shifted from battle field to governance and populations were voluntarily kept inside the geographical domain of the conflict. Confronted to this "new way of war", civilians found themselves helpless as preventive displacement was no more protective. In order to show its capacity to rule and protect, CNDP first occupied rural areas which were population traditional "safe heaven"; forcing them to remain in their villages. To diminish conflict impact, Kinshasa government decided to restrain displaced population access to urban area, especially to the city of Goma, and forced IDPs to remain in Rutshuru and Masisi territories. According OCHA, in July 2008, 26 996 IDPs were present in the locality of Rutshuru. 16 205 were hosted by relatives or host families, 8 510 in public spaces as schools or churches and 2 281 in camps. While originally, Rutshuru had a 10 000 inhabitant population. Between August 2006 and July 2008, Rutshuru population had grown of 300%. Within few months, Masisi and Rutshuru urban areas became open air camps in which civilian population were left at armed groups, military forces and local authorities' mercy.

Recurrent conflicts in East DRC find their roots into ethnical rivalries for land, economical space bounded to power exercise. This ethnico-economico-political struggle is a

² M'Bokolo E. ; *Afrique centrale: le temps des massacres*; dans le livre *Noir de la colonisation* sous la direction de Marc Ferro, p577 – 602; Hachette Littératures; édition Robert Laffont, 2003.

daily reality for North Kivu populations which is driving all of individual and communities choices. Each community is acting and taking its decisions according to that complex mosaic of economical, ethnic and political interests. A social behavior deeply inscribed into each and every individual's daily comportment. Despite the obligation to regroup in a confine geographical area, communities reproduced those social dynamics in displacement locations. So, instead of bordering on, each of those circles of influence superpose on to the other, reproducing pre existing tensions and rivalries.

According to CARE sociological study conducted in 2008³, IDPs were aware of their economical wage on host communities. Host populations declared that welcoming and hosting IDP was an honor for them but they also declared that they could not stand for long without any support from international community. Despite being optimistic, that study had the benefit to enlighten the fact that traditional coping mechanisms get eroded after 2 to 3 months. But violence made against IDP by host communities are very lightly evoked in it. This mainly because interviewed population were also CARE beneficiaries.

On the opposite Norwegian Refugees Council, which was working in the same area, had a different reading of the situation⁴. According to NRC team, IDPs were facing discriminated access to jobs; IDP single women were obligated to bargain their hosting against sexual favors... In July 2008, OCHA team's direct assessment confirmed NRC conclusions but also endorsed CARE study.

As CARE study demonstrated, IDPs' *habitus*⁵ are preserved and despite displacement reproduced in regrouping locations. But competition schemes are exacerbated by weapons bearers' practice of violence, transforming symbolic violence which characterizes social relations into real violence. Weapon bearers impose then to civilian the practice of real violence as common practice in social exchange.

Armed groups and weapon bearers have then a double impact on civilian populations. Primary, by restraining civilian populations' protection options and imposing cohabitation, they generate enclosed spaces which can be assimilated to *disciplinary or totalitarian societies*. But civilian population are not only passive victims in such environment, they participate to the creation of those *disciplinary societies* through their *habitus*. Individuals take the free decision to regroup in areas or with communities they identify as protective. But that choice is not completely free as it remains dictated by individual's *habitus* and this despite traditional protection mechanisms vanished. IDP behavior is then the produce of the *hysteresis*⁶ of their *habitus*, their ethnical *habitus* more precisely in that case.

³ CARE DRC; *Internal displacement in North Kivu-Hosting, camps and coping mechanisms* (CARE DRC, 27 April 2008).

⁴ NRC testimony in CARE DRC; opus cited.

⁵ **Habitus** can be defined as a system of dispositions (lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action). The individual agent develops these dispositions in response to the objective conditions it encounters. A central aspect of the habitus is its embodiment: Habitus does not only, or even primarily, function at the level of explicit, discursive consciousness. The internal structures become embodied and work in a deeper, practical and often pre-reflexive way.

⁶ **Hysteresis**: refers to systems that have *memory*, where the effects of the current input (or stimulus) to the system are experienced with a certain delay in time. In Bourdieu's definition of habitus, individuals are subject to the hysteresis of their habitus: the social reproduction of their habitus. **Social reproduction** refers to processes which sustain or perpetuate characteristics of a given social structure or tradition over a period of time.

Secondly, by imposing *disciplinary societies*, weapon bearers impose force cohabitation in a restricted geographical area with limited resources. IDPs are then an additional charge for host families but also disrupt host communities micro-economical equilibrium. As CARE study shows, that additional economical charge influx on both IDP and host population's choices. The disequilibrium issued from forced cohabitation generates a new domination relationship inside civilian populations. This second disequilibrium re-enforce the impact of the conflict on host communities and IDP. IDPs are forced to remunerate their hosts by sharing the aid they receive, sometime with sexual favors and are victims of intimidations, discriminated into access to jobs (...) from host communities. In enclosed spaces, economical disparities, even minimal between extreme poverty and total vulnerability, influx and shape *habitus transposability*⁷. The primal biological necessities to maintain life then take over on *habitus* developed in a peaceful environment. To survive, individuals shift from symbolic violence into real violence. In order to keep on being alive, individuals are forced to practice violence. Social domination mechanisms described by Pierre Bourdieu are then amplified by individual will to live. Far from vanishing, they accelerate and amplify individual auto reduction to its basic biological needs.

A discriminative access to aid

Considering Rutshuru and Masisi territories as too insecure for them to install permanent presence, relief societies and UN agencies operated from Goma, out side of the domain of the conflict, out side of those "open air camps". As civilian population were target of abuses and human rights violations from all arms bearers, including FARDC, the major challenge for Relief Societies was to identify displacement locations in order to be able to provide a timely response which would decrease civilians exposure to such abuses. In order to respond to this necessity of immediate action, United Nations initiated the Rapid Response Mechanism program.

According to description on OCHA web site rdc@humanitaire.net, RRM is a joint mechanism and tool set and managed by OCHA and UNICEF. Its aim is to increase humanitarian community capacity in DRC to respond efficiently and timely to crises putting population life in danger⁸.

Intervention criteria and covered crises typology, as published on November 2007, are as follow:

- Displaced or returned population since less than 3 months or accessible since less than 3 months
- Natural disasters
- Diseases out breaks
- The 3 months displacement criteria is flexible and situations encountered, mainly changes impacting populations living conditions, have to be taken in account

*All population forced to displacement and in extreme vulnerability due to security, outbreak or natural disaster beneficiate from RRM.*⁹

⁷ **Transposability:** human action is performed within the context of a pre-existing social structure which is governed by a set of norms and/or laws which are distinct from those of other social structures. Therefore, all human action is at least partly predetermined based on the varying contextual rules under which it occurs. However, the structure and rules are not permanent and external, but sustained and modified by human action.

⁸ <http://www.rdc-humanitaire.net/?-mecanisme-de-reponse-rapide-rrm->

⁹ Translation of the author.

As typology shows, RRM is mainly dedicated to IDPs. Its aim is to provide immediate material response to the populations needs. It is representative of the response given by the humanitarian community in North Kivu as it participates to the search of response capacity improvement and involves all the range of humanitarian actors present.

As an ambulance called for an accident, RRM team was coming in the location where IDP were spotted. On the spot, as an emergency medical team at hospital entrance, the team would carry out a need assessment and identifies IDPs and host community, separates victims from non victims. Then, as a nurse, the RRM team registers the individual who enters into the program criteria. They also conducted a WATSAN (water and sanitation) and school assessment to evaluate additional needs. Then, as a pharmacist delivering a prescription, they would deliver aid and when required aid was not in its mandate, such as food, they would pass beneficiaries list to another agency, just like a hospital would refer patients to a more adapt facility. Finally, once aid had been delivered, RRM would conduct monitoring assessment, just like medical check up on patients.

The analogy with hospital structure is voluntary as IDPs are just like patients. In the case of North Kivu, the complexity was to bring the "hospital" to the IDP as it was impossible to set the "hospital" (camps) on displacement locations. In that angle, RRM was particularly efficient and the volume of aid distributed through UNICEF and WFP partners impressive. But, RRM was targeting only IDPs and was not responding to host communities' needs. RRM had a discriminative approach based on a status distinction based on practices developed by humanitarian actions targeting refugees.

When it was initiated, refugee status was a great protection progress for civilian population affected by wars. By escaping their country, victims could access protection and security. In such case, differentiation between refugees and host population is eased by the geographical and administrative distance from the war zone. Borders and foreign security forces becomes the protective wall behind which relief can be safely provided to escaping civilian populations. By crossing a border, individuals become de facto "different" and "differentiable". It is this geographical and administrative (the border) distance with the persecutor object which allows relief societies to implement discriminative actions which are not attempting to the human dignity of neither refugees nor host populations.

With IDP, such distinction is impossible because of their legal status, hosts and displaced populations have the same legal status and rights. Differentiation is then artificially imposed. IDPs are considered as direct victims of war while hosts as sufficiently unaffected to host direct victims. Host populations are then perceived as unaffected by war. But in a country such as DRC, recovering from 15 years of war, host populations are economically as vulnerable as displaced populations. In addition, in North Kivu, host populations were not located outside conflict geographical domain but, as IDPs, inside the geographical theater of the conflict.

Such approach based on the unique focus and qualification as victim of IDP erases needs of other individuals present inside the conflict domain. Host populations become then "ghost populations" and are de facto excluded from relief aid.

Ghost populations have then two options to exist in the eyes of relief societies. They can first join the "norm" and become visible by being enlisted as IDP by relief societies. Such strategy is the most common, UNHCR and WFP evaluated approximately 50% of enlisted individuals in 2008 and 2009 were "false victims" of the conflict according to their reading grid.

Or they can rebel. What the FARDC families did. In January 2008, FARDC spouses present in the conflict domain, abandoned by their government (who is unable to pay his troops), show off their anger to not access relief, by attacking a relief society during an aid distribution. They were purposely evicted from this relief action as they were not considered as victims. The total denial of access to aid they did face was due to their family relation with DRC armed forces. Relief societies did consider them as combatants or with a similar legal status as armed groups according to International Humanitarian Law. For relief workers, civilian (with civilian rights according to Geneva Conventions) could only be identified victims. Other civilians would either be assimilated to armed forces or erased from the picture as non victim. Confronted to such misinterpretation of Geneva Conventions and IDPs codes of conducts from international community, "ghost" civilian population had no other option than using violence against civilian "victims" and relief societies to exist.

Local authorities and administrations in hosting areas also tend to be excluded by relief societies. They were only used as informants by NGOs and UN agencies to locate displaced populations and, in the best cases, were kept informed on what relief societies may or may not do. In reaction, local authorities organized demonstrations against NGOs and UN agencies. By using symbolic violence (demonstrations¹⁰), local authorities tried to limit relief societies' access to IDPs and regain their power/dominant position.

Concerning weapon bearers, as their status excluded them automatically from aid; they simply used violence against civilians and relief societies to access it.

Implementation of Humanitarian aid obliges any actor to protect civilian populations. But, as Veronique Zanetti states; "if external actors [occurring relief societies] have a right to intervene, they do not have any obligations¹¹". There is, for rescuers a right to restraint themselves to rescue an individual if the cost of this rescue operation is too high for him self¹². Human cost must be favorable for the rescuer. For the individuals excluded from relief, using violence is then exercising their right to live and being rescued by using their capacity to influence relief societies by increasing the risks incurred by rescuers. They attend to take back their symbolic or real dominant social position on IDPs and through such action to diminish relief societies' dominance on them. Once again, habitus transposability and hysteresis are expressed as displaced populations, even if they are from the same ethnic group, remain "foreigners" as from another village and therefore individuals external from the hosting group. In the case of FARDC families and local authorities this is reinforced by the fact they do socially belong to the real dominant group of the State. In the field of realms, they do have a symbolic social authority recognized by other social groups; a social recognition which should not affect their civilian status according to IHR and Law of War.

An attempt at modeling

Humanitarian aid impact can be measured by its capacity to generate violence (real or symbolic). An effective humanitarian aid will not generate violence against any civilian

¹⁰ Such demonstrations were sometime violent (destruction of UN properties, cars...) but no one was ever harmed and the attempt was not to harm anyone, keeping them in the field of symbolic violence.

¹¹ Zanetti V.; *l'intervention humanitaire, Droit des individus, Devoir des Etats* (Humanitarian intervention, Individual Rights, States Obligations); Le champ éthique, Labor et Fides; 2008.

¹² V. Zanetti bases her statement on the German Law but such right to not provide help is recognized in any juridical system. Main example used being you are not forced to save someone drowning if you do not know how to swim.

population and limit civilian population exposure to conflict violence. Also, it should reduce beneficiary population vulnerability to any kind of abuses. Conflicts impact on civilian populations is not restricted to direct violence against individuals but include impact on access to food security, health, education and all the societal factors providing to individuals to live with dignity.

Therefore, it is possible to establish a model representing the impact of humanitarian aid on civilian populations through a referential measuring vulnerability (on the vertical axe) and violence (on the horizontal axe). Those two axes crossing at the point of equilibrium where violence and vulnerability are null.

Vulnerability is measured qualitatively (access to health, shelter, food...) but also quantitatively through financial incomes. Vulnerability would be considered as null when financial incomes are equal to 1\$/day/individual and access to aid unrestricted.

What differentiates "peace" from "war" is not the absence of violence but the nature of the violence. In war, violence is real, physical. In peace, physical violence is replaced by symbolic violence (political debate, social class struggle...). Violence would then be considered as null at the breaking point between real and symbolic violence.

Individual and actors (civilian population, weapon carriers, relief societies...) present in the geographical domain of the conflict are represented by points which are placed in the referral according to their initial vulnerability and violence value.

- Humanitarian actors will have a null initial violence value (0 on the horizontal axe) and a negative vulnerability value as they are financially rich; they own the aid (an important negative value on the vertical axe).
- Weapon carriers, in opposition, will have a high violence value (an important positive value on the horizontal axe) and, in the case of FARDC, a positive vulnerability value as they are not paid. (a positive but low value on the vertical axe).
- Displaced populations will have a null violence value (they do not exercise any kind of violence neither physical nor symbolic) and a high vulnerability value as directly affected by the conflict.
- Weapons bearers' dependants will have a symbolic violence value symmetrical to weapons bearers as being given the same social powers than them by local population (an important negative value on the horizontal axe) and a vulnerability value equivalent to weapons bearers (a positive but low value on the vertical axe).
- Local civil authorities will have an important symbolic value as representatives of civil authorities, higher than weapons bearers' dependants (high negative value on horizontal axe). They will also have a negative vulnerability value to represent the privileges from their administrative authority (a low negative value on the vertical axe).
- Host populations will have a very low symbolic violence value to represent their capacity to host IDPs (low negative value on horizontal axe), but lower than local authorities and weapons bearers' dependants. They will also have a low but positive vulnerability value to reflect the fact they are also affected by the conflict.

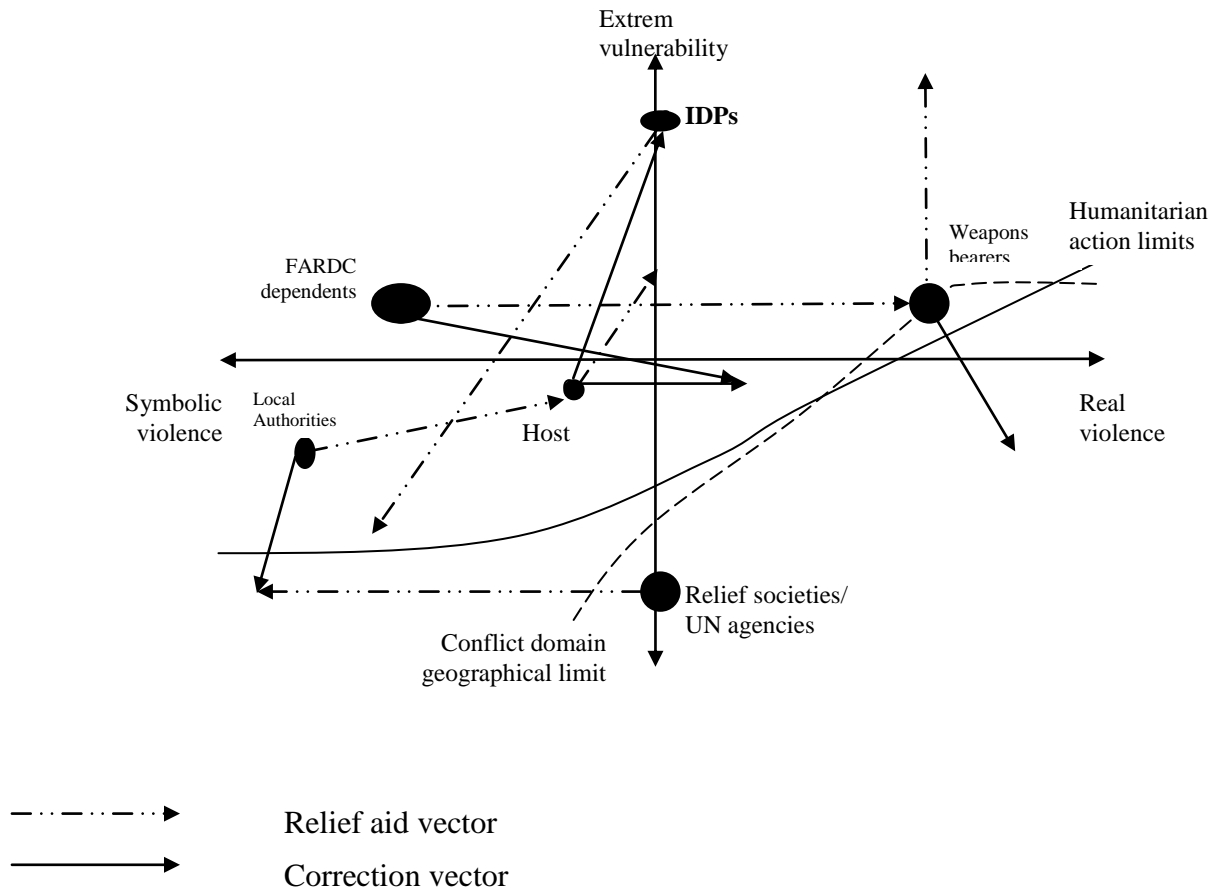
Actions taken by each and every actor will be represented by vectors in order to translate their dynamic characteristic.

Humanitarian aid, through access/denial to victim status, impacts individual social status and therefore to his/her capacity to use violence (symbolic and real). It also impacts individuals' vulnerability status. So relief aid will be represented by a vector starting from the individual up to the point this aid should bring him.

- Relief aid vector for IDPs will then have a high negative coefficient on vertical axe (vulnerability) as it aims to reduce vulnerability. And a negative medium horizontal coefficient (violence) as it increases, through victim status, individuals' social status and therefore gives symbolic violence capacity.
- Relief aid for weapons bearers will have a negative violence value as they are excluded from aid and therefore do not affect their social status. But a negative vertical coefficient (vulnerability) proportionally inversed to IDPs relief aid vector.
- Relief societies' relief aid vector will have a null vertical coefficient as delivering aid does not affect their vulnerability. But they will have an important horizontal negative coefficient as their capacity to deliver relief aid gives them an important power, a symbolic violence capacity.
- Weapons bearers' dependants' relief aid vector will have the same characteristics than weapons bearers' relief aid vector.
- Host populations relief aid vector, as they also are excluded from aid will have negative coefficients in violence and vulnerability as not accessing aid increase their vulnerability and decrease their social status.
- Local authorities' relief aid vector will have the same characteristics than host populations as they are assimilated to them by relief societies.

But individuals are not passive actors. So to represent their reactivity to relief aid impact, it is necessary to add a correction vector. This correction vector translates actions taken by individuals to counter relief aid impact and recover their primary social status and diminish their vulnerability status. If relief societies exercise their power through aid (reducing vulnerability), other actors exercise their power through violence (symbolic or real) or by alternative strategies such as being assimilated to victims by host populations. Correction vectors then translate the actions taken by each social groups established by relief societies described previously.

Graphic model is than as follow:



As this graphic shows, the only option for ghost civilian population to extract them selves from relief societies exclusion, out of the option of becoming an IDP, is the use of violence (real or symbolic). All their corrective actions are characterized by a use of violence, real (for host population, weapons bearers' dependents) or symbolic (for the local administration). Relief aid, instates of participating to the construction of a protective environment, accelerates and participates to the resort to violence and to human rights abuses against civilians. Relief aid becomes then a tool which is counter productive to military and political objectives.

Moving forward

Cohabitation between IDPs and host populations is never easy and exempted of rivalries between those two artificial social groups. But to preserve the benefits of relief aid in COIN operation, military have to ensure they do not create *disciplinary societies*. In conflict and post conflict context, minimal economical disparities between social groups are amplified by all individual will to survive. The arbitrary distinction between IDPs and host communities to access relief aid might be useful to external actors (civilian and military) but also participates to the complex mechanisms undermining State legitimacy and capacity to protect.

In IDPs crisis management, access to relief aid based on status is counter productive and fuels social marginalization. If it may participate to fuel the insurgency fought by the host government, it mostly participates to fuel the defiance between host government and external

forces. In DRC, this mismanagement of relief aid did actively participate to the rejection of MONUC and international community by the Congolese and Kabila government. International forces have then to face a double insurgency: the insurgency they fight against with the host government and an insurgency from the Host Nation against the international community. In order to avoid such this, integrating host populations is a necessity which found its rational both in humanitarian action and COIN. As a humanitarian necessity first because humanitarian action end is to protect civilian populations and a discriminative, violence generating action goes against its core principle. Secondly as a COIN necessity as it undermines not the Host Nation action but the relation between external power and the Host Nation.

Part of the solution is the approach initiated by the European Union in its humanitarian 2008 administrative decision and finally partially endorsed by the United Nations in July 2008¹³: a support to all populations in IDPs hosting locations based on vulnerability and need assessment which targets indiscriminately IDPs and host communities. Based on such assessments, a differentiated aid can be delivered to all and responding to each individual particular need. It allows integrating all social components of the Host Nation and participates to both protection of civilian and State legitimacy.

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¹³ Such change of approach by the United Nations happened after a dramatic increase of security incidents targeting relief aid workers between January and July 2008. During that period 47 security incidents targeting national and international relief aid workers were recorded.