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Sovereignty

Sovereignty is a type of power usually ascribed to an actor who can determine the behavior and actions that are permitted within a given territory. In humanitarian arenas, sovereignty may be temporary and unclear as different actors fight for power over the same territory. Sovereignty may also be layered, with different actors controlling different elements of life. For example, religious authorities may hold sovereignty over questions of marriage, child custody, and inheritance, while the regional land registry holds sovereignty over the distribution of seeds and tools. It is very important for humanitarian actors to understand who holds sovereignty over their area of operations. Whoever holds sovereignty is the actor that humanitarian negotiations will take place with as they determine whether and what kind of humanitarian activities are permitted (Fast, Freeman, O'Neill and Rowley 2013).

Commonsense understanding of sovereignty attributes it to states and their regional and local institutions. However, in many places the state only holds nominal sovereignty, while effective sovereignty is exercised by non-state actors (Denham and Lombardi 1996). For humanitarian actors, it is important to understand this distinction between nominal and effective sovereignty because humanitarian work often requires interactions with both levels. While, for example, visa and official permissions are obtained via the state, they may be useless in the actual area of operations if actors who do not recognize state sovereignty exercise effective sovereignty in that region.

The ability to hold on to sovereignty is not only related to brute force, but also to whether the population believes in the legitimacy of the sovereign. This means it is important to understand that while sovereignty is held or exercised it is also embodied in people, institutions, and, of course, deities. To understand better the distribution of power, and the strength of a sovereign actor in their area of operations, humanitarian actors should gather an understanding of whom sovereignty is invested in by recipients of aid.

The question of whether humanitarian agencies can develop into sovereign actors is contested (Hoffmann 2011). A research paper argues that “many gaps in the protection of refugees can be connected to a de facto transfer of

responsibility for managing refugee policy from sovereign states to United Nations agencies” (Kagan 2011: 1). The humanitarian aid system is designed to cover a short-term inability of states to protect their populations. However, today there is a growing phenomenon of protracted humanitarian crises. Therefore, humanitarian aid can develop into a permanent substitute for public services that should be provided by the state. In the case of a refugee crisis, for example, if a state lacks relevant administrative bodies, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees decides whether someone receives refugee status or becomes eligible for aid. In certain crises, therefore, humanitarian actors may well hold the “power over life and death” of aid recipients, which is another famous definition of sovereignty (Foucault 1977).

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Stabilization

Stabilization is ambiguous in its definition and highly politically oriented in its practice. Therefore, it is one of the most controversial notions in the humanitarian vocabulary. The term became popular in the 1990s, around the same time as civil–military cooperation (CIMIC). Both CIMIC and stabilization have been criticized for curtailing the neutrality, impartiality, and independence of the humanitarian community. The ideological and operational meaning of stabilization is embedded in American (US) military doctrine concerning