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by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
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Humanitarian Operations in Project Management: A Comparative Analysis of Military-Sponsored Missions and International Organizations[1]

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Abstract

Humanitarian operations constitute a distinct domain of project management that emerges in contexts of acute disruption caused by natural disasters, armed conflicts, and pandemics. Unlike conventional development initiatives, such operations unfold under conditions of volatility, uncertainty, and insecurity, requiring approaches that balance speed, adaptability, legitimacy, and sustainability. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of two principal paradigms of humanitarian project management: military-sponsored missions and international humanitarian organizations (IHOs). Military operations are characterized by hierarchical command structures, centralized decision-making, and extensive logistical assets. These features enable rapid mobilization and large-scale interventions, particularly in insecure or infrastructure-deficient environments. However, their rigid operating procedures, high financial costs, and association with state interests often constrain adaptability and compromise perceptions of neutrality. By contrast, IHOs including the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières prioritize humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Their project management practices emphasize participatory planning, stakeholder accountability, and contextual adaptability. Despite limited logistical resources and dependence on external funding, IHOs enjoy legitimacy and community trust, which are crucial for access and long-term resilience. The analysis identifies five key dimensions of divergence: command and control, resource mobilization, stakeholder engagement, flexibility, and perceptions of neutrality. Case studies such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, and the 2014 Ebola crisis illustrate both tensions and complementarities. Militaries excel in scale and speed, while IHOs contribute legitimacy and cultural sensitivity. Hybrid approaches, combining military logistical capacity with humanitarian expertise, emerge as promising models for enhancing effectiveness. The paper concludes that advancing humanitarian project management requires structured civil–military coordination mechanisms, adoption of shared standards, joint training, and sustainability-oriented planning. By integrating efficiency with legitimacy, humanitarian interventions can achieve outcomes that are not only timely but also principled, thereby reinforcing the core objective of alleviating human suffering.

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Key Words: Humanitarian Operations, Project Management, Military-Sponsored Missions, International Humanitarian Organizations, Civil-Military Coordination, Sustainability

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of Humanitarian Operations

Humanitarian operations are large-scale interventions aimed at alleviating human suffering caused by disasters, armed conflicts, and pandemics. They involve the rapid deployment of resources, personnel, and logistics to provide essential services such as food, shelter, medical care, and protection (Apte, 2010; Tatham & Kovács, 2010; Thomas & Kopczak, 2005). These operations require robust project management frameworks to ensure efficiency, timeliness, and accountability in highly uncertain and volatile environments (Altay & Green, 2006; Cozzolino, 2012a). Unlike traditional development projects, humanitarian projects are often reactive, short-term, and carried out under extreme constraints, which places unique demands on their management approaches (Walker & Maxwell, 2009; Dubey et *al*., 2019).

Two dominant actors in humanitarian operations are military-sponsored missions and international humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and United Nations agencies. Both actors aim to reduce human suffering, but they operate under different mandates, organizational cultures, and stakeholder expectations (Studer, 2001; Burkle et *al*., 2014). The contrast between them lies not only in their resources but also in how they structure, plan, and execute humanitarian interventions (Altay & Labonte, 2011; Heaslip & Tatham, 2022).

Table 01. Comparison of Military-Sponsored Missions vs. Humanitarian Organizations

Humanitarian Operations	
Large scale interventions to alleviate human sufferings caused by disasters, conflicts, and pandemics.	
Key Features	**Management Operations**
• Rapid deployment • Provide food, shelter, medical care, protection, etc. • Require robust project management • Operate in volatile environments	• Reactive & Short-term • Extreme constraints • High Uncertainty • Accountability & Timeliness issues
Military Sponsored-Missions	**International Humanitarian Organizations**
• Structured, resource-heavy • Security-driven • Operate under state-mandates	• Neutral, impartial • Focused on humanitarian principles • Independence of political agendas

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1.2. The Role of Project Management in Humanitarian Contexts

Project management provides the systematic framework through which humanitarian interventions are designed, implemented, and evaluated. According to PMI (2021), project management involves applying knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to meet project requirements. In humanitarian settings, however, project management extends beyond efficiency metrics to incorporate adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and stakeholder coordination (Altay & Green, 2006; Balcik et *al.*, 2010; Dubey et *al.*, 2019). For example, while development projects may prioritize long-term outcomes, humanitarian projects prioritize immediacy, delivering aid under conditions where lives may depend on timeliness (Van Wassenhove, 2006).

A distinguishing feature of humanitarian project management is the uncertainty and volatility of operating environments (Burkle et *al.*, 2014); Moshtari, 2016). Unlike commercial projects, humanitarian missions must contend with unstable political climates, destroyed infrastructure, and ongoing threats to safety (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Grace et *al.*, 2023). These conditions influence project management strategies differently depending on whether the mission is conducted by the military or by international humanitarian organizations (Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

Table 02. Project Management in Humanitarian Operations

Aspect	Humanitarian Project Management
Purpose	Framework for designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions
Key Features	Efficiency and adaptability, cultural sensitivity, stakeholder coordination, timeliness
Environmental Challenges	Political instability, destroyed infrastructure, unsafe/volatile conditions, high uncertainty
Military Missions	Structured, command-driven, security-focused, state mandate.
Humanitarian Organizations	Needs-based, impartial, flexible, collaborative, guided by humanitarian principles.

1.3. Military-Sponsored Humanitarian Operations

Military forces frequently undertake humanitarian operations as part of broader missions to stabilize regions affected by disaster or conflict (Burkle et *al.*, 2014). These missions may be domestically driven, as in the case of military support during hurricanes or earthquakes, or internationally driven, where armed forces provide humanitarian relief in foreign territories (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). Militaries are often called upon due to their

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www.pmworldjournal.com

Humanitarian Operations in Project Management
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Featured Paper

capacity for rapid deployment, their logistical superiority, and their ability to provide security in hostile environments (Apte, 2010; Cozzolino, 2012a; Dubey et *al*., 2019).

Project management in military humanitarian operations reflects the broader culture of the armed forces: hierarchical command structures, centralized decision-making, and a strong emphasis on discipline and coordination (Bollettino & Anders, 2020; Heaslip & Tatham, 2022). These characteristics ensure speed and efficiency but can also create rigidity. Moreover, military involvement in humanitarian operations is often politically charged (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Balcik et *al*., 2010). While states may justify military humanitarian interventions as altruistic, such missions may also serve foreign policy or strategic interests (Rieff, 2002; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). This dual-purpose raises questions about neutrality, a central principle of humanitarianism.

Table 03. Military Involvement in Humanitarian Operations

Military Humanitarian Operations	
Missions by armed forces to stabilize regions after disasters / conflicts, providing rapid reliefs, logistics, and security.	
Strengths	**Project Management Traits**
• Rapid deployment • Provide food, shelter, medical care, protection, etc. • Require robust project management • Operate in volatile environments	• Hierarchical command • Centralized decisions • Discipline-focused • Speed and coordination
Concerns	
• Rigidity in approach • Politically charged motives • Risk to neutrality (humanitarian principle) • Dual purpose: relief + Strategic Interests	

1.4.   International Humanitarian Organizations

In contrast, international humanitarian organizations such as the ICRC and MSF are founded on principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Haug, 1993; Studer, 2001). Their missions are explicitly humanitarian, with the primary objective of assisting populations in need regardless of political or military considerations (Bollettino & Anders, 2020). These organizations typically employ participatory project management approaches, engaging with local stakeholders to ensure that interventions are culturally appropriate, inclusive, and sustainable (Walker & Maxwell, 2009; Dubey et *al*., 2019)

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
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www.pmworldjournal.com

Humanitarian Operations in Project Management
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Featured Paper

Unlike military forces, international humanitarian organizations operate under resource constraints, relying on donor funding and partnerships (Burkle *et al.*, 2014; Moshtari, 2016). Their logistical capacities are limited compared to state militaries, often requiring reliance on commercial contractors or military support for transportation and security (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Van Wassenhove, 2006; Dubey *et al.*, 2019; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). Nevertheless, their legitimacy and effectiveness rest on their adherence to humanitarian principles, which fosters trust among affected populations and international actors.

Table 04. International Humanitarian Organizations

Humanitarian Organizations	
• Founded on neutrality, impartiality, and independence. • Primary goal: Assist populations in need regardless of politics.	
Core Principles	**Project Management Traits**
• Neutrality • Impartiality • Independence • Humanitarian Focus only	• Participatory approach • Engage local stakeholders • Ensure cultural appropriateness • Inclusive & Sustainable
Concerns	
• Limited resources (donor-funded) • Weaker logistics VS. military • Dependence on contractors or state support • Vulnerability in insecure environments	
Strengths	
• Legitimacy & trust built on strict adherence to humanitarian principles. • Fosters credibility with affected communities and global actors.	

1.5.   The Need for Comparative Analysis

The coexistence of military forces and international organizations in humanitarian operations creates both synergies and tensions. On one hand, militaries bring unmatched capacity for rapid mobilization, while humanitarian organizations bring legitimacy and cultural sensitivity (Grace *et al.*, 2023). On the other hand, differences in mandates and management styles often lead to friction. For example, while militaries may prioritize rapid clearance of infrastructure for strategic mobility, humanitarian organizations may advocate for community-driven reconstruction processes (Dubey *et al.*, 2019; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

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Featured Paper

Project management serves as the lens through which these differences can be examined systematically. Understanding the distinct approaches of militaries and international organizations allows for identifying areas of complementarity, reducing duplication of efforts, and improving overall humanitarian outcomes (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Burkle et *al*., 2014; Moshtari, 2016). Comparative analysis is therefore crucial not only for academic purposes but also for informing practitioners, policymakers, and donors on how best to coordinate humanitarian interventions (Dubey et *al*., 2019).

Table 05. Coexistence of Military and Humanitarian Organizations

Aspect	Military Forces	Humanitarian Organizations
Synergies	Rapid mobilization, strong logistics, security provision	Legitimacy, neutrality, cultural sensitivity, community trust
Tensions	Mandate driven by state interests, rigidity in approach	Resource constraints, differing mandates from militaries
Examples of Differences	Prioritize clearance of infrastructure for strategic mobility	Advocate for community-driven, inclusive reconstruction
Role of Project Management	Structured, centralized, command-driven decision making	Participatory, stakeholder-focused, adaptable approaches
Value of Comparative Analysis	Helps identify complementarity and avoid duplication in joint missions	Improves coordination with militaries, informs policy & donor strategies

1.6. Objectives and Structure of the Paper

This paper aims to explore the differences in humanitarian operations project management between military-sponsored missions and international organizations. The primary objectives are:

1. To examine the *project management methodologies* employed by military-sponsored humanitarian missions.
2. To analyze the *project management approaches* of international humanitarian organizations.
3. To compare and contrast the *two paradigms across dimensions* such as command structures, resource mobilization, accountability, and stakeholder engagement.
4. To discuss the *implications of these differences* for effectiveness, neutrality, and sustainability in humanitarian operations.

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www.pmworldjournal.com

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Featured Paper

The paper is structured as follows:

- **Section 1** provides background on humanitarian project management and its unique challenges.
- **Section 2** analyzes military-sponsored humanitarian operations, highlighting strengths and limitations.
- **Section 3** examines international humanitarian organizations and their approaches to project management.
- **Section 4** offers a comparative analysis of the two paradigms, identifying key differences and complementarities.
- **Section 5** concludes with recommendations for enhancing coordination and hybrid approaches in humanitarian project management.

2. Military-Sponsored Humanitarian Operations

2.1. Context

Military-sponsored humanitarian operations represent a unique intersection of defense policy, foreign relations, and humanitarian need (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Dubey et *al.*, 2019). Unlike international organizations whose missions are strictly humanitarian in scope, militaries are national institutions whose engagement in humanitarian action is typically shaped by political considerations, strategic objectives, and state sovereignty (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Grace et *al.*, 2023). Their involvement has historically been controversial, often praised for logistical efficiency and criticized for potential politicization. To understand their role in humanitarian project management, it is essential to analyze their structures, logistics, strengths, and limitations in detail (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005; Tatham & Kovács, 2010; Burkle et *al.*, 2014; Moshtari, 2016; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

Table 06. Military-Sponsored Humanitarian Operations

Aspect	Military-Sponsored Humanitarian Operations
Nature	Intersection of defense policy, foreign relations, and humanitarian need
Mandate & Objectives	Shaped by political considerations, strategic objectives, and state sovereignty
Strengths	Logistical efficiency, rapid deployment, security provision
Limitations	Potential rigidity, politicization, not strictly humanitarian in scope
Controversies	Praised for efficiency but criticized for blurring humanitarian neutrality

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

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2.2. Structure and Command

One of the defining characteristics of military-sponsored humanitarian missions is the reliance on hierarchical command and control structures (Bollettino & Anders, 2020). Militaries traditionally operate within a rigid chain of command in which authority flows vertically from senior leadership down to field operatives. Orders are issued centrally and disseminated to units, ensuring standardization and clarity in roles and responsibilities (Altay & Labonte, 2011; Heaslip & Tatham, 2022).

This system has significant implications for humanitarian project management. In military-led operations, decision-making is centralized, allowing leaders to coordinate resources quickly, assign tasks with precision, and enforce accountability through strict reporting lines (Burkle et *al*., 2014). This contrasts with the more participatory approaches adopted by international NGOs, which often allow for greater autonomy at field level (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Moshtari, 2016). The military system reduces ambiguity and accelerates execution in situations where time is critical, such as search-and-rescue missions following natural disasters (Cozzolino, 2012a; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

A historical example can be drawn from Operation Unified Assistance in 2004, when the U.S. military responded to the Indian Ocean tsunami. The U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) directed operations centrally, deploying over 15,000 personnel, 25 ships, and 94 aircraft (Scheper, 2006; Elleman, 2007; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). The centralized structure allowed for rapid mobilization and effective task allocation. Aircraft were directed to prioritize reconnaissance missions, followed by the distribution of food and water, while naval units provided engineering support to restore damaged infrastructure (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Dubey et *al*., 2019).

However, the rigid command structure can also be limiting in humanitarian contexts. Project management scholars highlight that successful humanitarian interventions often require adaptive management, where field workers engage directly with affected communities to adjust plans in real time (Walker & Maxwell, 2009; Richey et *al*., 2009; Dubey et *al*., 2019). Military structures, by contrast, may inhibit local feedback loops, leading to interventions that prioritize efficiency over appropriateness (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Moshtari, 2016; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). For instance, while a centralized command may quickly establish an airlift for water supplies, it might overlook local alternatives for clean water provision, thereby underutilizing indigenous resources (Burkle et *al*., 2014).

Another challenge lies in the integration of civilian and military actors within the command system. The military's hierarchical structure may conflict with the decentralized approaches of NGOs, complicating coordination (Balcik et *al.*, 2010; Richey et *al.*, 2009). Civilian agencies sometimes perceive military command as overly rigid, while militaries may view NGOs as inefficient or uncoordinated (Bollettino & Anders, 2020). These tensions can hinder joint project planning and execution, especially in complex emergencies such as the 2010 Haiti earthquake, where both military and civilian actors were heavily involved (CRED & UNDRR, 2020; Grace et *al*., 2023).

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

Humanitarian Operations in Project Management
by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
Featured Paper

From a project management perspective, military command systems align with a functional organizational model, in which decision-making authority rests with top leadership and tasks are compartmentalized into specialized units (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Richey *et al.*, 2009; Kovács & Tatham, 2010). This ensures accountability and discipline but limits bottom-up innovation. While effective in disaster response, such structures may struggle in longer-term recovery phases where adaptability and community participation are critical (Cozzolino, 2012a; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).
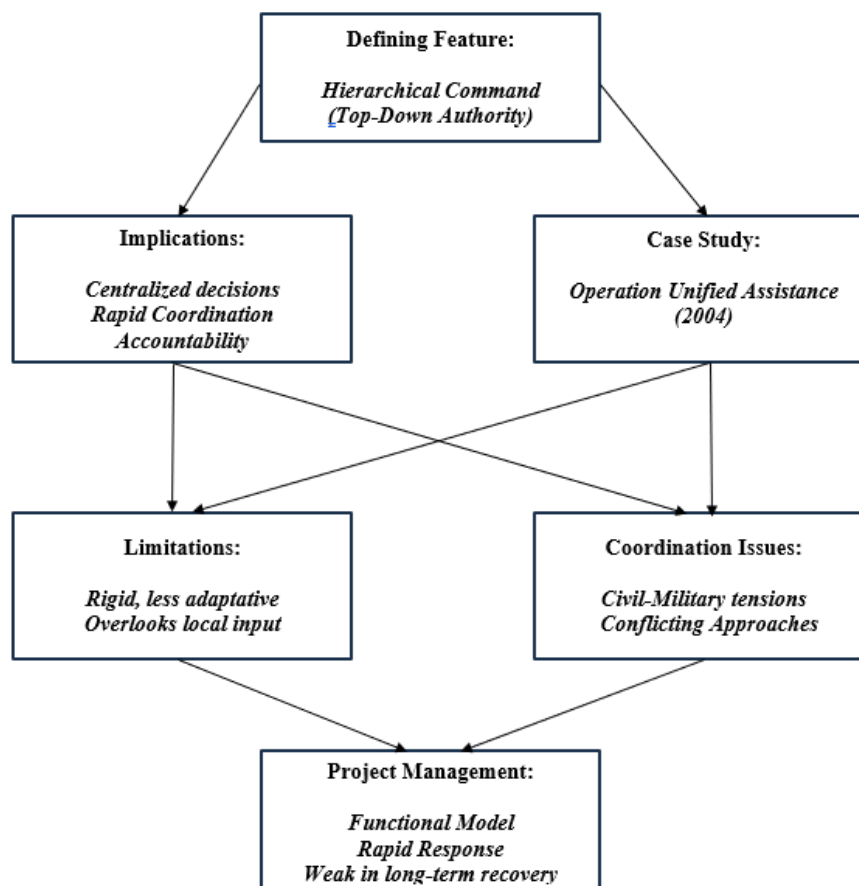

Figure 01. Military Command Structures in Humanitarian Operations

2.3. Resource Mobilization and Logistics

Perhaps the most widely recognized contribution of militaries to humanitarian operations lies in their logistical capabilities. Militaries maintain vast stocks of equipment, personnel, and transport infrastructure designed for combat readiness, which can be repurposed for humanitarian needs (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005; Kovács & Tatham, 2010). These resources give militaries a distinct comparative advantage over NGOs and international organizations, which often lack heavy logistical capacity (Apte, 2010; Dubey et *al.*, 2019).

Key elements of military logistical strength include (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Bollettino & Anders, 2020):

- **Transportation assets:** Militaries operate fleets of trucks, cargo aircraft, helicopters, and naval vessels capable of delivering aid supplies to otherwise inaccessible areas.
- **Engineering units:** Armed forces often deploy combat engineers to build temporary bridges, repair roads, and restore electricity or water systems.
- **Medical support:** Mobile field hospitals, trauma units, and surgical teams allow militaries to provide immediate medical care in crisis zones.
- **Communications infrastructure:** Advanced satellite and radio systems enable command centers to maintain operational awareness in remote or disaster-affected areas.
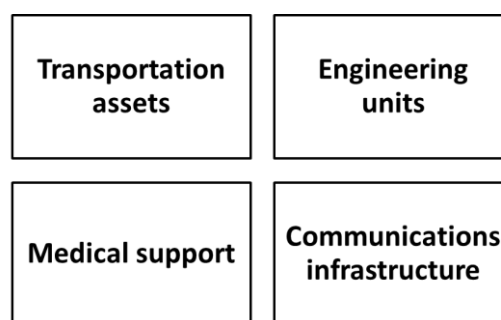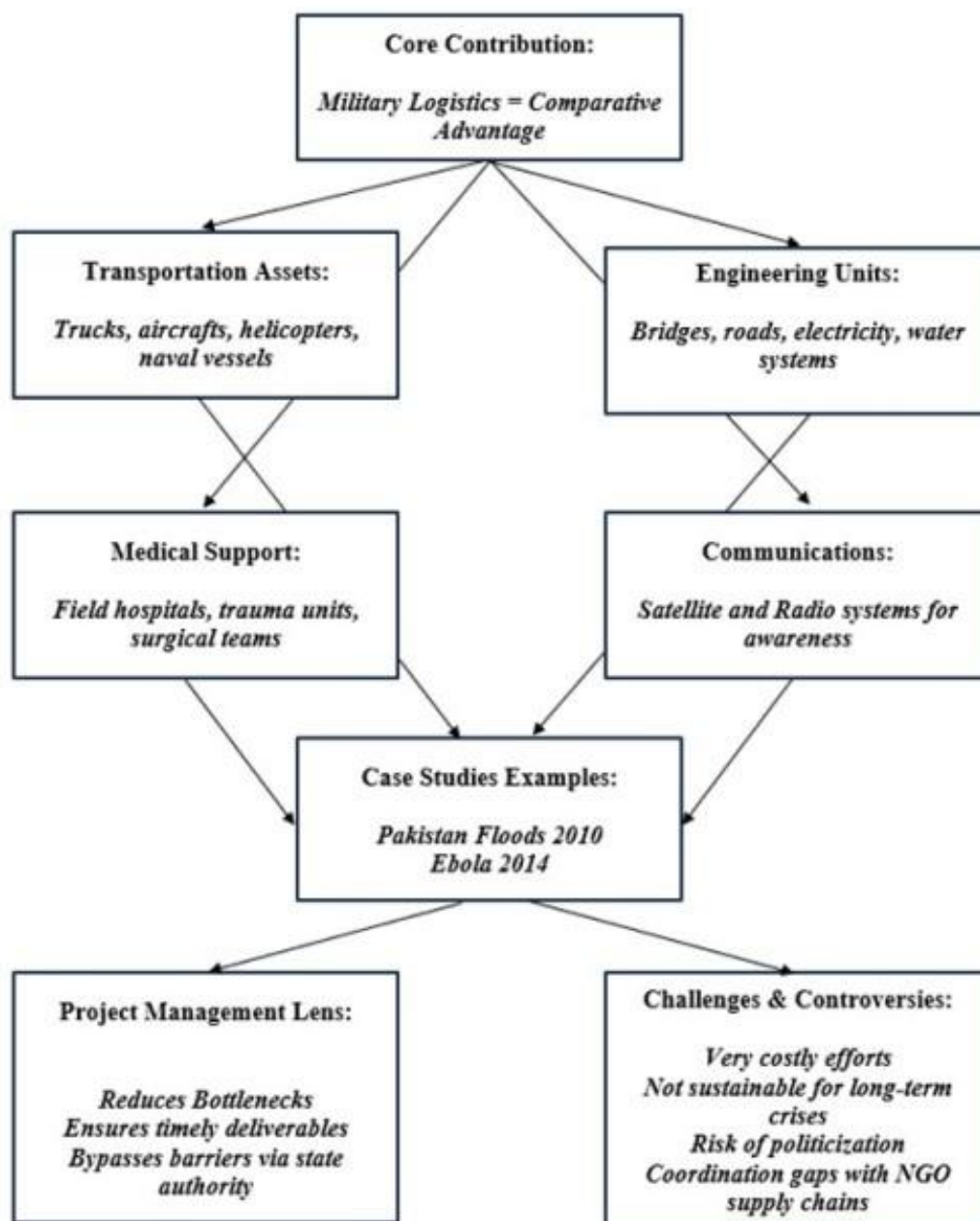

Figure 02. Key Elements of Military Logistics Success

These capabilities were on display during the 2010 Pakistan floods, where the Pakistani military, supported by international partners, deployed helicopters to deliver food and rescue stranded civilians in areas cut off by floodwaters (CRED & UNDRR, 2020). Similarly, during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, U.S. and U.K. military forces-built treatment facilities and provided logistical support to health workers (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Dubey et *al*., 2019).

From a project management lens, such capacity directly addresses risk management and schedule reliability. By reducing logistical bottlenecks, militaries ensure that project deliverables such as food distribution, medical care, or shelter are provided within strict timeframes. For instance, while NGOs may face delays due to customs clearance or limited transport, militaries can bypass such barriers through state-backed authority and prepositioned assets (Burkle et *al*., 2014; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

However, reliance on military logistics is not without controversy. Critics argue that military assets are extremely costly to operate compared to civilian alternatives (Van Wassenhove, 2006; Thomas & Kopczak, 2005; Tatham & Kovács, 2010; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). Deploying aircraft carriers or heavy-lift helicopters for humanitarian purposes may provide immediate visibility and impact but is rarely sustainable in protracted crises (Richey et *al*., 2009; Moshtari, 2016). Furthermore, the use of military transport in humanitarian operations can blur the line between aid and political intervention, particularly when recipients associate the aid with foreign policy objectives (Dubey et *al*., 2019).

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

Humanitarian Operations in Project Management
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Featured Paper

Another challenge lies in the integration of military logistics with civilian supply chains. NGOs often operate with lean supply systems, relying on local procurement and small-scale distribution (Bollettino & Anders, 2020). Military systems, by contrast, are designed for bulk delivery and centralized warehousing (Tatham & Kovács, 2010; Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Cozzolino, 2012b). This mismatch can cause inefficiencies if not properly coordinated. For example, large quantities of supplies delivered by militaries may overwhelm local distribution channels, leading to bottlenecks or waste (Burkle et *al.*, 2014; Dubey et *al.*, 2019).

Figure 03. Military Command Structures in Humanitarian Operations

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

Humanitarian Operations in Project Management
by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
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2.4. Strengths

Military-sponsored humanitarian operations offer several unique strengths that distinguish them from the work of international organizations.

- **Speed and Scale of Response.** Militaries are often the first responders to disasters due to their constant readiness (Bessler & Seki, 2006). Unlike NGOs that require time to mobilize funding and personnel, militaries have prepositioned resources and trained personnel ready for deployment (Apte, 2010; Kovács & Tatham, 2010). This capacity is crucial in the immediate aftermath of disasters when lives can be saved by rapid intervention (Cozzolino, 2012a). For example, within 48 hours of the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, the Pakistani military had deployed over 30,000 troops to the affected areas, providing immediate relief and rescue operations (Moshtari, 2016; Bollettino & Anders, 2020; CRED & UNDRR, 2020).

- **Security Provision.** Militaries can operate in environments where NGOs cannot safely deploy, such as active conflict zones or areas with widespread lawlessness. They can establish secure corridors for aid delivery and protect humanitarian convoys from armed groups (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Richey et *al.*, 2009). This security role was evident in Somalia during the early 1990s, where U.S. and UN military forces provided protection for aid agencies amid widespread conflict (Dubey et *al.*, 2019; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

- **Integration with National Policy.** Military humanitarian missions are closely aligned with governmental strategic objectives, ensuring political support and funding. This integration can enhance coordination across ministries, allowing humanitarian projects to benefit from state resources beyond the military (Richey et *al.*, 2009; Balcik et *al.*, 2010). For instance, during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, U.S. military operations were fully integrated into federal disaster response frameworks, ensuring access to both defense and civilian resources (U.S. Senate, 2006; Kovács & Tatham, 2010).

- **Technical Expertise.** Militaries employ specialists in engineering, medicine, logistics, and communications whose skills are directly transferable to humanitarian contexts (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005; Tatham & Kovács, 2010). These capabilities often exceed what civilian agencies can provide under time-sensitive (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

Table 07. Strengths of Military-Sponsored Humanitarian Operations

Strength	Description
Speed and Scale of Response	Rapid deployment due to prepositioned resources and trained personnel; crucial in early disaster response.
Security Provision	Operate in conflict zones or insecure areas. Establish secure aid corridors and protect convoys.
Integration with National Policy	Aligned with state objectives; benefit from political support, funding, and inter-ministerial coordination.

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

Humanitarian Operations in Project Management
by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
Featured Paper

2.5. Limitations

Despite their strengths, military-sponsored humanitarian missions face significant limitations that impact their effectiveness and legitimacy.

- **Neutrality and Legitimacy.** One of the most persistent criticisms is that military involvement undermines the humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence (Rieff, 2002). When aid is delivered by armed forces, affected populations may perceive it as politically motivated, particularly if the military represents a foreign power (Richey et *al.*, 2009; Dubey et *al.*, 2019; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). This perception can jeopardize trust and restrict access to vulnerable communities. For example, in Afghanistan, aid delivered by NATO forces was often viewed as part of a broader counterinsurgency strategy, leading to skepticism and even hostility from local populations (CRED & UNDRR, 2020).
- **Rigid Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).** Military operations prioritize order, discipline, and adherence to SOPs. While these ensure consistency, they can reduce flexibility in dynamic humanitarian environments (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Kovács & Tatham, 2010). In contrast, effective humanitarian project management often requires adaptive strategies that respond to emerging needs and incorporate local feedback (Burkle et *al.*, 2014; Moshtari, 2016). A rigid focus on efficiency can result in misaligned priorities, such as delivering surplus food aid when water and sanitation are more urgently required (Bollettino & Anders, 2020).
- **Short-Term Orientation.** Military missions typically focus on immediate stabilization rather than long-term recovery. Once the acute phase of a disaster passes, military forces often withdraw, leaving NGOs or local authorities to manage reconstruction. This short-term approach can create dependency gaps, where communities accustomed to military support struggle to adjust to slower-paced civilian aid efforts (Grace et *al.*, 2023).
- **Cost Inefficiency.** The high operational costs of military assets raise questions about efficiency. Deploying aircraft carriers or military transport planes to deliver aid can be exponentially more expensive than using civilian alternatives, limiting sustainability in prolonged crises (Van Wassenhove, 2006; Oloruntoba & Banomyong, 2018).
- **Civil-Military Tensions.** Finally, coordination between militaries and humanitarian organizations is often fraught with mistrust (Balcik et *al.*, 2010). NGOs worry that association with military actors compromises their neutrality, while militaries may view NGOs as uncoordinated or reluctant to share information (Dubey et *al.*, 2019). These tensions can undermine overall effectiveness, as seen in both Afghanistan and Iraq where civil-military cooperation remained limited despite shared objectives (Moshtari, 2016; CRED & UNDRR, 2020).

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

Humanitarian Operations in Project Management
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Table 08. Limitations of Military-Sponsored Humanitarian Operations

Limitation	Description
Neutrality and Legitimacy	Military aid may be seen as politically motivated, undermining neutrality and independence.
Rigid Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)	Strict adherence to SOPs reduces adaptability; risks misaligned priorities when local needs shift.
Short-Term Orientation	Focus on immediate stabilization, not long-term recovery. Withdrawal after acute phases creates dependency gaps.

3. International Humanitarian Organizations

3.1. Outline

International humanitarian organizations (IHOs) are central actors in global humanitarian assistance and disaster response (Cozzolino, 2012a). Unlike military-sponsored missions, which are closely tied to state interests and national security priorities, IHOs operate under independent humanitarian mandates rooted in international law and global norms (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Burkle et *al.*, 2014; Oloruntoba & Banomyong, 2018). They seek to alleviate suffering, protect vulnerable populations, and uphold human dignity in situations of crisis, whether caused by natural disasters, armed conflicts, or complex emergencies (Walker & Maxwell, 2009; Dubey et *al.*, 2019; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). Their approaches to project management reflect humanitarian principles and differ significantly from military-led operations (Moshtari, 2016).
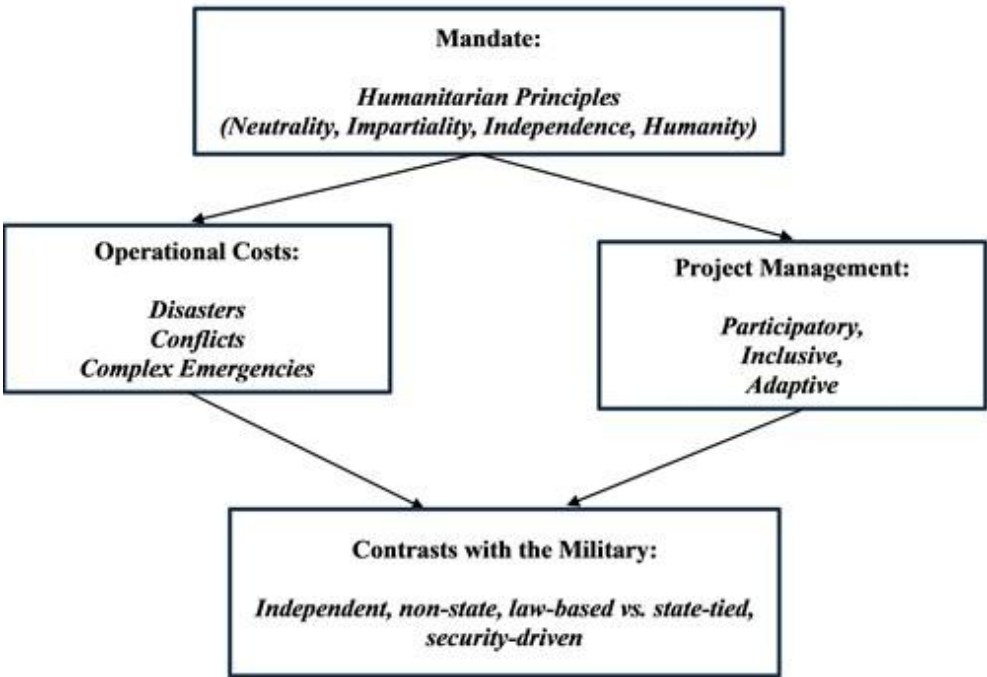

Figure 04. Conceptual Overview: International Humanitarian Organizations

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

Humanitarian Operations in Project Management
by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
Featured Paper

3.2. Principles and Mandates

The work of IHOs is grounded in a set of humanitarian principles : neutrality, impartiality, independence, and humanity, that shape their mandates and operational practices. These principles, codified by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 1993, remain foundational across the humanitarian sector (Haug, 1993):

- **Neutrality** requires organizations to abstain from taking sides in hostilities or engaging in political, racial, or ideological controversies.
- **Impartiality** mandates that aid be provided solely based on need, without discrimination.
- **Independence** emphasizes autonomy from political, economic, or military influence, ensuring that humanitarian decisions remain guided by humanitarian objectives.
- **Humanity** underscores the central mission of preventing and alleviating human suffering wherever it is found.
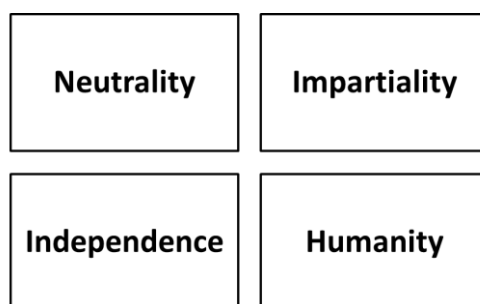
Figure 05. ICRC Principles

These principles ensure that IHOs enjoy legitimacy and access in volatile environments. For instance, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has gained unparalleled access to conflict zones such as Syria and Afghanistan precisely because of its strict adherence to neutrality (Studer, 2001; Kovács & Tatham, 2010; 2015; Zyck & Krebs, 2015; CRED & UNDRR, 2020). Similarly, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has withdrawn from operations when its independence was compromised, such as in Ethiopia during the 1980s famine, where aid was being manipulated for political purposes (Richey et *al*., 2009; Dubey et *al*., 2019).

In project management terms, these principles translate into stakeholder-sensitive planning and execution. Unlike military missions that align with national security objectives, IHOs deliberately avoid integration with state agendas, maintaining autonomy to preserve credibility (Burkle et *al*., 2014). This independence shapes their project cycles, from needs assessments to monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that humanitarian outcomes remain the sole priority (Zyck & Krebs, 2015).

Another important dimension of mandates is the reliance on international law, particularly International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and refugee law. Organizations like the ICRC have a legal mandate to visit prisoners of war, monitor compliance with the Geneva Conventions, and provide assistance to civilians affected by armed conflict (Studer, 2001; Kovács & Tatham, 2010).

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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UN agencies such as the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) have mandates derived from UN General Assembly resolutions to protect displaced populations (Richey et *al*., 2009; Dubey et *al*., 2019). These legal underpinnings give IHOs both authority and responsibility in project management contexts, distinguishing them from military-led missions, which operate under state sovereignty (Burkle et *al*., 2014; Moshtari, 2016).

Table 09. International Humanitarian Organizations: Principles and Mandates

Dimension	International Humanitarian Organizations (IHOs)
Core Principles	Neutrality, Impartiality, Independence, Humanity.
Operational Practices	Aid based on need; abstain from political/military agendas; preserve autonomy
Project Management Implications	Stakeholder-sensitive planning; independent project cycles; outcomes guided by humanitarian priorities

3.3.   Project Management Approach

IHOs approach project management with an emphasis on adaptability, inclusivity, and accountability. Unlike the rigid command structures of military operations, humanitarian organizations often adopt matrix or projectized organizational structures (Walker & Maxwell, 2009; Richey et *al*., 2009; Kovács & Tatham, 2010). In a matrix structure, staff may report to both functional managers (e.g. medical, logistics, communications) and project managers responsible for specific missions (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005; Tatham & Kovács, 2010; Burkle et *al*., 2014). This structure fosters cross-functional collaboration and flexibility (Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

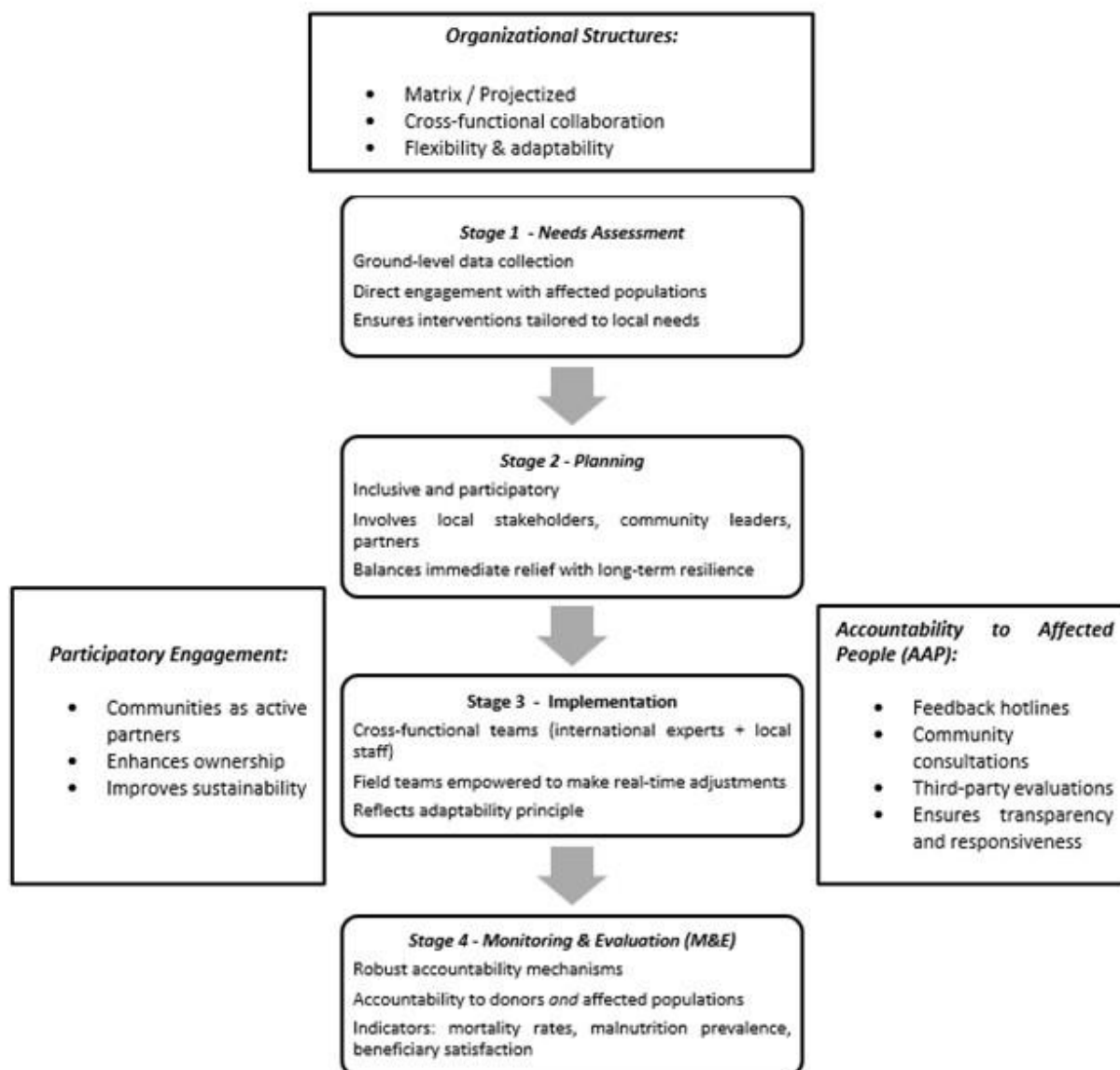Project management cycles in IHOs usually include the following stages:

1. **Needs Assessment:** Ground-level data collection involving direct engagement with affected populations. This process ensures that interventions are tailored to local needs rather than externally imposed priorities (Richey et *al*., 2009). For example, MSF conducts detailed epidemiological surveys before setting up field hospitals to ensure alignment with community health needs (Kovács & Tatham, 2010).
2. **Planning:** Humanitarian projects emphasize inclusivity, involving local stakeholders, community leaders, and partner organizations. Plans are designed not only for immediate relief but also for long-term resilience where possible (Burkle et *al*., 2014; Moshtari, 2016; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).
3. **Implementation:** Cross-functional teams are deployed, often composed of international experts and local staff. Field teams are empowered to make real-time adjustments, reflecting the principle of adaptability (Dubey et *al*., 2019).
4. **Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E):** Donor requirements necessitate robust accountability mechanisms. Organizations use indicators such as mortality rates,

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
Featured Paper

malnutrition prevalence, and beneficiary satisfaction to measure impact (Van Wassenhove, 2006; Kovács & Tatham, 2010).

This approach ensures that humanitarian projects remain context-specific and responsive. Unlike militaries, which often import standardized operating procedures, IHOs adapt project frameworks to the realities of the field (Richey et *al*., 2009). For instance, in the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, NGOs such as Oxfam and Save the Children modified shelter programs to reflect local cultural practices in housing design, thereby enhancing acceptance and sustainability (Kovács & Tatham, 2010).

An important feature of IHO project management is participatory engagement. Beneficiaries are not treated as passive recipients but as active partners in project design and implementation. This participatory ethos enhances local ownership, reduces dependency, and increases sustainability. For example, CARE International's community-based disaster risk reduction programs in Bangladesh involve local committees in planning and implementing flood preparedness measures, ensuring that interventions are grounded in community realities (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

Finally, accountability is central. IHOs are accountable not only to donors but also to affected populations, a concept referred to as "accountability to affected people" (AAP). Mechanisms such as feedback hotlines, community consultations, and third-party evaluations ensure transparency and responsiveness. This emphasis on accountability contrasts with military missions, which are primarily accountable to governments and taxpayers (Burkle et *al*., 2014).

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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Figure 06. Project Management Approach of International Humanitarian Organizations (IHOs)

3.4. Strengths

IHOs bring a range of strengths to humanitarian operations that distinguish them from military-sponsored missions:

- **Community-Centered Operations.** A defining strength of IHOs is their emphasis on community engagement. By incorporating local voices into project design and implementation, IHOs ensure that interventions are culturally appropriate and sustainable (Moshtari, 2016). For example, in South Sudan, the ICRC partnered with local water committees to rehabilitate wells, ensuring long-term maintenance after the ICRC's departure (Studer, 2001; Dubey et *al.*, 2019).

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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- **Legitimacy and Trust.** Because they adhere strictly to humanitarian principles, IHOs enjoy legitimacy with local communities, governments, and international actors. This legitimacy often translates into greater access to conflict zones**.** For instance, MSF has been able to operate hospitals in areas controlled by insurgents in Syria because of its perceived neutrality and independence (Kovács & Tatham, 2010).
- **Flexibility and Adaptability.** IHOs are known for their ability to adapt rapidly to changing needs. Field teams are empowered to make operational adjustments without waiting for centralized approval. For example, during the 2010 Haiti earthquake response, NGOs shifted from food aid distribution to cash-transfer programming once markets reopened, demonstrating adaptability to evolving conditions (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; CRED & UNDRR, 2020).
- **Specialized Expertise.** Many IHOs bring sector-specific expertise that complements broader humanitarian efforts. MSF, for instance, specializes in emergency medical care, while the UN World Food Programme (WFP) focuses on food security and logistics (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005; Tatham & Kovács, 2010; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). This specialization ensures technical excellence and efficiency in delivering sectoral outcomes (Burkle et *al.*, 2014).
- **Normative Influence.** Beyond operational work, IHOs contribute to shaping global humanitarian norms and standards. Organizations such as Sphere developed widely recognized guidelines for humanitarian response, setting benchmarks for shelter, water, and health interventions (Sphere Association, 2018).

Table 10. Strengths of International Humanitarian Organizations

Strength	Description
Community-Centered Operations	Engages local communities in project design and implementation; ensures cultural appropriateness and sustainability.
Legitimacy and Trust	Adherence to humanitarian principles fosters legitimacy and access.
Flexibility and Adaptability	Field teams empowered to adapt to evolving needs without centralized approval.

3.5. Limitations

Despite their strengths, IHOs face several limitations that constrain their effectiveness.

- **Logistical Constraints.** Compared to militaries, IHOs lack heavy transport, rapid deployment assets, and engineering capabilities. While they excel in specialized services, they often depend on partnerships with militaries or commercial contractors for large-scale logistics (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). For example, during the 2014 Typhoon Haiyan response in the Philippines, NGOs relied heavily on U.S. military

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

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by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
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aircraft and ships to transport supplies to remote islands (Tatham & Kovács, 2010; Grace et al., 2023).

- **Dependence on Funding.** IHOs are highly dependent on donor funding from governments, multilateral agencies, and private contributions (Kovács & Tatham, 2010). This dependence introduces financial uncertainty and can skew priorities toward donor interests. For example, during the Syrian refugee crisis, funding shortfalls forced the UNHCR to cut food and shelter assistance, leaving many refugees vulnerable (UNHCR, 2015; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).
- **Coordination Challenges.** The humanitarian system is fragmented, with thousands of NGOs often operating in the same crisis. This fragmentation can result in **duplication of efforts, competition for resources, and lack of strategic coherence (**Balcik et al., 2010). The cluster coordination system, introduced by the UN in 2005, aimed to address this challenge, but problems persist. During the 2010 Haiti earthquake, poor coordination led to overlapping services in some areas while other communities remained underserved (Oloruntoba & Banomyong, 2018; Dubey et al., 2019, CRED & UNDRR, 2020).
- **Security Risks.** Unlike militaries, IHOs lack the capacity to provide security for their staff. This limitation restricts access to high-risk environments (Kovács & Tatham, 2010). In countries like Afghanistan and Somalia, NGOs have withdrawn due to targeted attacks on humanitarian workers, limiting their ability to reach the most vulnerable populations (Moshtari, 2016; Oloruntoba & Banomyong, 2018; CRED & UNDRR, 2020).
- **Short-Term Funding Cycles.** Many IHOs operate under project-based funding with short-term cycles, which undermines their ability to invest in long-term development or resilience-building (Kovács & Tatham, 2010). Donor priorities may shift quickly, leading to abrupt program closures despite ongoing needs (Dubey et al., 2019).

**Table 11. Limitations of International Humanitarian Organizations**

Limitation	Description
Logistical Constraints	Lack of heavy transport, rapid deployment, and engineering assets; often rely on militaries or contractors.
Dependence on Funding	High dependence on donor funding creates financial uncertainty and donor-driven priorities.
Coordination Challenges	Fragmented system with duplication, competition, and poor coherence despite UN cluster coordination.

4. Comparative Analysis

4.1. Context

Humanitarian crises demand a variety of actors, and the presence of both military-sponsored missions and international humanitarian organizations (IHOs) often leads to overlapping efforts. While both pursue the ultimate goal of alleviating human suffering, their project management approaches diverge due to differences in mandates, resources, organizational structures, and

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

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by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
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accountability (Kovács & Tatham, 2010, Burkle *et al.*, 2014; Moshtari, 2016). This section offers a comparative analysis of the two paradigms, organized around five key dimensions: command and control, resource mobilization, stakeholder engagement, flexibility and adaptability, and neutrality and perceptions.
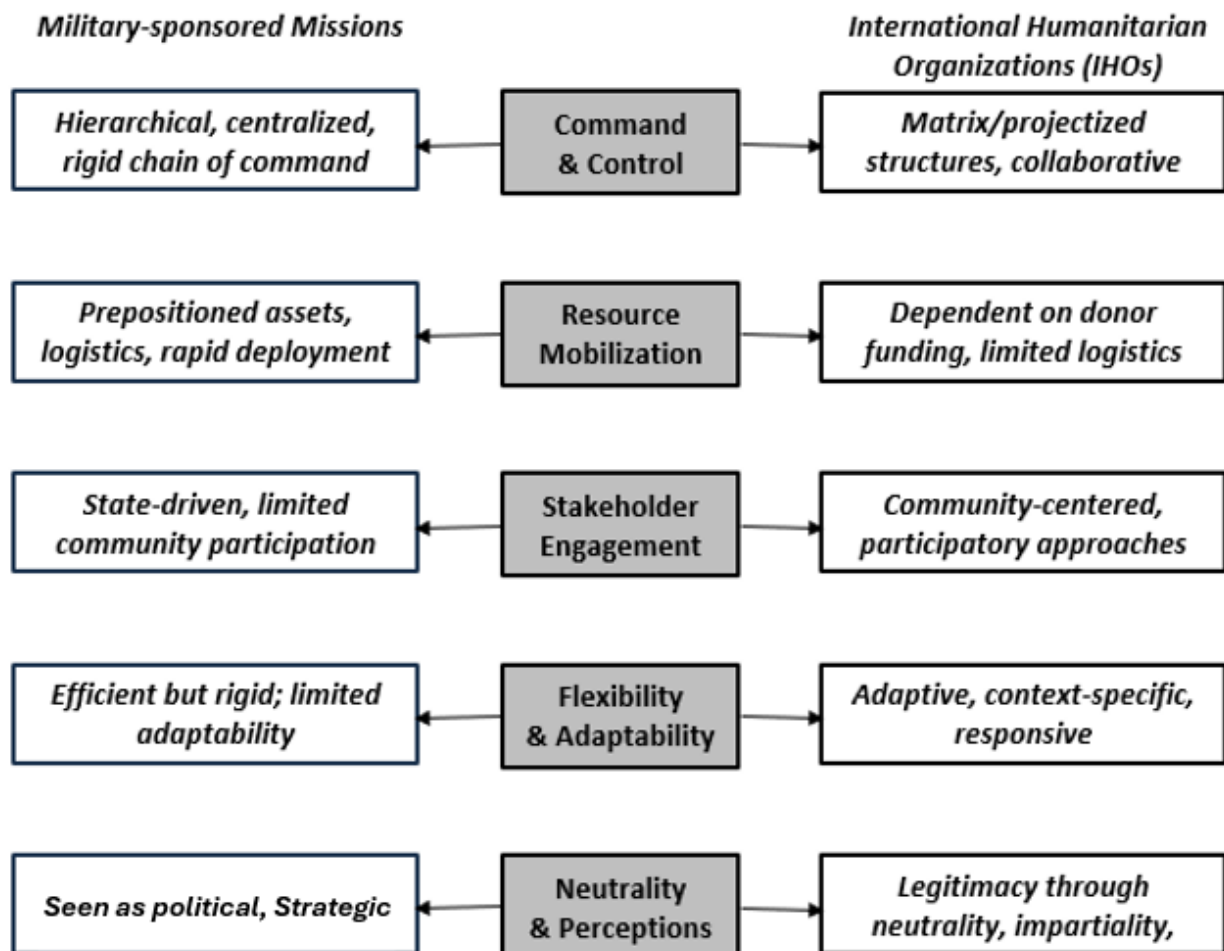
Figure 07. Military-sponsored Missions VS. International Humanitarian Organizations (IHOs)

4.2.   Command and Control

The command structures of military missions and IHOs embody contrasting organizational cultures that shape how humanitarian projects are planned and executed.

- **Military Command Systems.** Militaries rely on centralized, hierarchical chains of command, designed for rapid decision-making and precise task execution:
    - Orders flow top-down from commanders to units, minimizing ambiguity and ensuring uniform implementation (Altay & Labonte, 2011; Heaslip & Tatham, 2022; Moshtari, 2016). This system is efficient in situations requiring speed and discipline, such as search-and-rescue operations immediately following natural disasters (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Cozzolino, 2012a). For example, after the 2004

Indian Ocean tsunami, U.S. Pacific Command directed Operation Unified Assistance with clear central authority, coordinating air and sea assets across multiple countries (Scheper, 2006; Elleman, 2007).

o   However, this model has drawbacks in humanitarian settings. Centralized control can alienate local stakeholders who may feel excluded from decision-making processes. Humanitarian project management literature emphasizes the importance of participatory planning to ensure interventions meet community needs (Walker & Maxwell, 2009). Militaries, by contrast, often lack mechanisms for incorporating bottom-up feedback, leading to mismatches between aid delivered and actual community priorities (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

- **IHO Decision-Making.** In contrast, IHOs operate with decentralized, participatory structures. Many adopt matrix or projectized systems where authority is distributed among field offices and project managers (Van Wassenhove, 2006).

  o   Decisions are informed by consultations with beneficiaries, local leaders, and partner organizations. For instance, during the 2015 Nepal earthquake response, NGOs adjusted shelter designs based on local cultural preferences for multi-generational households (Moshtari, 2016).

  o   The trade-off, however, is slower decision-making. Achieving consensus among multiple stakeholders takes time, which may be a liability in the immediate aftermath of disasters. During the 2010 Haiti earthquake, some NGOs were criticized for delays in aid distribution compared to the rapid deployment of U.S. military forces (Moshtari, 2016; CRED & UNDRR, 2020).

➔ **Comparative Insight.** From a project management perspective, military command systems resemble functional organizational structures, efficient but rigid, while IHOs lean toward projectized structures flexible but slower (Moshtari, 2016). An optimal approach may combine military speed with IHO inclusivity through joint planning frameworks that balance efficiency and community participation (Burkle et *al*., 2014).

➔

Table 12. Comparative Command Structures: Military vs IHOs

Dimension	Military Command Systems	IHO Decision-Making
Organizational Culture	Centralized, hierarchical chains of command	Decentralized, participatory, matrix/projectized structures
Decision-Making Style	Top-down, orders flow from commanders to units	Consultations with field offices, beneficiaries, and partners
Strengths	Rapid decision-making, speed, precision, uniform implementation	Inclusive, adaptive, culturally appropriate interventions

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
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4.3. Resource Mobilization

The ability to mobilize and sustain resources is a critical differentiator between militaries and IHOs.

- **Military Resources.** Militaries command vast state-funded logistical assets, including transport fleets, engineering units, and medical facilities.
  - These resources allow them to deploy rapidly and operate at scale. In Pakistan's 2005 earthquake response, the Pakistani military mobilized 30,000 troops, helicopters, and engineering units within days, providing critical relief in remote mountain regions (Dubey et *al*., 2019). Such capacity ensures reliability in project scheduling and reduces the risk of supply chain disruptions (Cozzolino, 2012a; Moshtari, 2016; CRED & UNDRR, 2020).
  - However, military resources are also cost-intensive. Operating aircraft carriers or heavy-lift helicopters for humanitarian purposes is significantly more expensive than civilian alternatives (Bessler & Seki, 2006; Van Wassenhove, 2006; Moshtari, 2016). Furthermore, large-scale resource mobilization may overshadow local economies, creating dependency rather than fostering resilience (Kovács & Tatham, 2010).

- **IHO Resources.** IHOs, by contrast, are donor-dependent, operating within constrained budgets.
  - This reliance on external funding introduces uncertainty: projects may be scaled back or terminated if donor priorities shift. For example, during the Syrian refugee crisis, funding shortfalls forced the UNHCR to cut food and cash assistance programs, leaving refugees vulnerable (UNHCR, 2015).
  - Yet, IHOs compensate through innovation and local resource utilization. Many NGOs prioritize local procurement to stimulate economies and reduce costs. For example, instead of importing food aid, NGOs in Ethiopia have increasingly relied on local agricultural markets, both reducing transport costs and supporting livelihoods (Moshtari, 2016).

➔ **Comparative Insight.** Militaries excel in capacity and speed, while IHOs specialize in efficiency and sustainability. A hybrid approach may involve militaries handling large-scale transport and engineering tasks, while NGOs manage localized distribution and procurement (Moshtari, 2016). Such complementarity enhances both efficiency and sustainability in project outcomes (Dubey et *al*., 2019).

Table 13. Comparative Resource Mobilization: Military vs IHOs

Dimension	Military Resources	IHO Resources
Resource Base	State-funded, vast logistical assets (i.e. transport fleets, engineering units, medical facilities)	Donor-dependent, constrained budgets, external funding uncertainty

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)

Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025

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by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE

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Strengths	Rapid deployment, large-scale operations, reliability in project scheduling, reduced supply chain risks	Local procurement, innovation, supports local economies, cost reduction
Limitations	Cost-intensive, overshadow local economies, risk of dependency	Funding volatility, risk of program cuts if donor priorities shift

4.4.   Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement highlights the differing lines of accountability between militaries and IHOs.

- **Military Accountability.** Militaries are primarily accountable to national governments and allied partners.
    - o Their humanitarian operations often serve dual purposes: alleviating suffering while advancing strategic or diplomatic objectives (Rieff, 2002; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). For example, U.S. humanitarian assistance in Southeast Asia following the 2004 tsunami improved regional perceptions of American power, aligning with foreign policy goals (Scheper, 2006; Elleman, 2007).
    - o While this integration with national policy ensures political backing and funding, it risks conflating humanitarianism with state interests.

- **IHO Accountability.** In contrast, IHOs are accountable to a wider range of stakeholders: donors, beneficiaries, and international humanitarian norms (Kovács & Tatham, 2010).
    - o Donor agencies require detailed financial and outcome reporting, while accountability to affected populations is institutionalized through feedback mechanisms and participatory planning. For example, CARE International uses community scorecards in Malawi to involve beneficiaries in monitoring health projects, enhancing transparency and trust (Moshtari, 2016).
    - o However, donor accountability can sometimes skew priorities. Projects may be designed to align with donor preferences rather than local needs, creating a tension between upward accountability (to funders) and downward accountability (to beneficiaries) (Dubey et *al*., 2019).

- ➔ **Comparative Insight.** Militaries are accountable to states, while IHOs are accountable to global humanitarian norms and communities. This divergence shapes project objectives: military missions may prioritize visibility and rapid impact, whereas IHOs focus on inclusivity and sustainability. Effective coordination requires recognizing these divergent accountability lines and developing mechanisms to align them in joint operations (Balcik et *al.*, 2010; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

Table 14. Comparative Stakeholder Engagement & Accountability: Military vs IHOs

Dimension	Military Accountability	IHO Accountability
Accountability Lines	Primarily accountable to national governments and allied partners	Accountable to donors, beneficiaries, and humanitarian norms
Strengths	Strong political backing and funding; integrates with state policy	Transparency through reporting and participatory planning; fosters trust
Limitations	Risk of conflating humanitarianism with strategic or diplomatic objectives	Donor priorities may override local needs; tension between upward and downward accountability

4.5.   Flexibility and Adaptability

The ability to adapt to evolving circumstances is critical in humanitarian contexts, where needs often shift rapidly.

- **Military Adaptability.** Militaries, while efficient, operate under rigid standard operating procedures (SOPs).
  - Their project management emphasizes discipline and predictability, often at the expense of flexibility (Kovács & Tatham, 2010). For example, during the Ebola crisis in West Africa, U.S. military units constructed treatment centers as planned, but the epidemic's trajectory shifted, and many facilities remained underutilized (Moshtari, 2016; Bollettino & Anders, 2020; CRED & UNDRR, 2020).
  - The rigid adherence to preplanned deliverables limited adaptability to changing epidemiological realities.

- **IHO Adaptability.** IHOs are comparatively highly adaptive, empowered to adjust interventions based on real-time feedback.
  - NGOs frequently shift modalities, for example, transitioning from in-kind food aid to cash-based assistance once local markets stabilize, as seen in post-earthquake Haiti. Their decentralized project structures encourage iterative adaptation, aligning with principles of agile project management (Dubey et *al*., 2019; CRED & UNDRR, 2020).
  - However, adaptability has limits. NGOs often struggle to scale up operations due to resource constraints. Large-scale crises such as the Syrian refugee displacement overwhelm NGO capacities, forcing reliance on state or military actors for logistical support (UNHCR, 2015).

➔ **Comparative Insight.** Militaries excel in scale and predictability, while IHOs excel in adaptability and responsiveness. A combined approach could leverage military capacity for large-scale infrastructure while allowing IHOs to provide adaptive, community-driven programming (Moshtari, 2016; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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Table 15. Comparative Flexibility & Adaptability: Military vs IHOs

Dimension	Military Adaptability	IHO Adaptability
Approach to Adaptability	Operate under rigid SOPs; prioritize discipline and predictability	Decentralized structures; iterative, feedback-driven; agile project management principles
Strengths	Efficient, reliable, scalable; strong in structured delivery	Highly adaptive to shifting needs; responsive to local realities
Limitations	Limited flexibility; rigid adherence to preplanned deliverables	Resource constraints limit scalability in large crises

4.6. Neutrality and Perceptions

Neutrality and perception are critical determinants of access and legitimacy in humanitarian operations.

- **Military Perceptions.** Military humanitarian missions risk politicization, as affected communities may perceive aid as an extension of foreign policy.
  - In Afghanistan, for example, humanitarian assistance delivered by NATO forces was often viewed as part of counterinsurgency operations, undermining trust in aid agencies and blurring the line between combatants and humanitarians (Bollettino & Anders, 2020; CRED & UNDRR, 2020).
  - Such perceptions jeopardize humanitarian access, as armed groups may target aid workers perceived as aligned with enemy forces (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Moshtari, 2016).

- **IHO Perceptions.** IHOs, by contrast, derive legitimacy from their strict adherence to humanitarian principles.
  - This legitimacy facilitates access to contested areas where militaries cannot operate. For example, the ICRC has negotiated access to prisoners of war in conflicts worldwide by maintaining neutrality (Studer, 2001; Richey et *al.*, 2009).
  - However, IHOs' neutrality can limit access when security risks are extreme. Unlike militaries, they cannot enforce safe operating conditions and may withdraw when threats escalate, as occurred with MSF's withdrawal from Somalia in 2013 after repeated attacks (CRED & UNDRR, 2020).

Comparative Insight. Military missions are effective where security is the primary barrier, but they risk undermining humanitarian legitimacy (Burkle et *al.*, 2014). IHOs are effective where neutrality and trust are essential, but their lack of security capacity constrains access in high-risk areas. Coordinated approaches must carefully manage perceptions, ensuring that humanitarian

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025

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by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE

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space is preserved even when military and civilian actors collaborate (Dubey et *al*., 2019; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

Table 16. Comparative Neutrality & Perceptions: Military vs IHOs

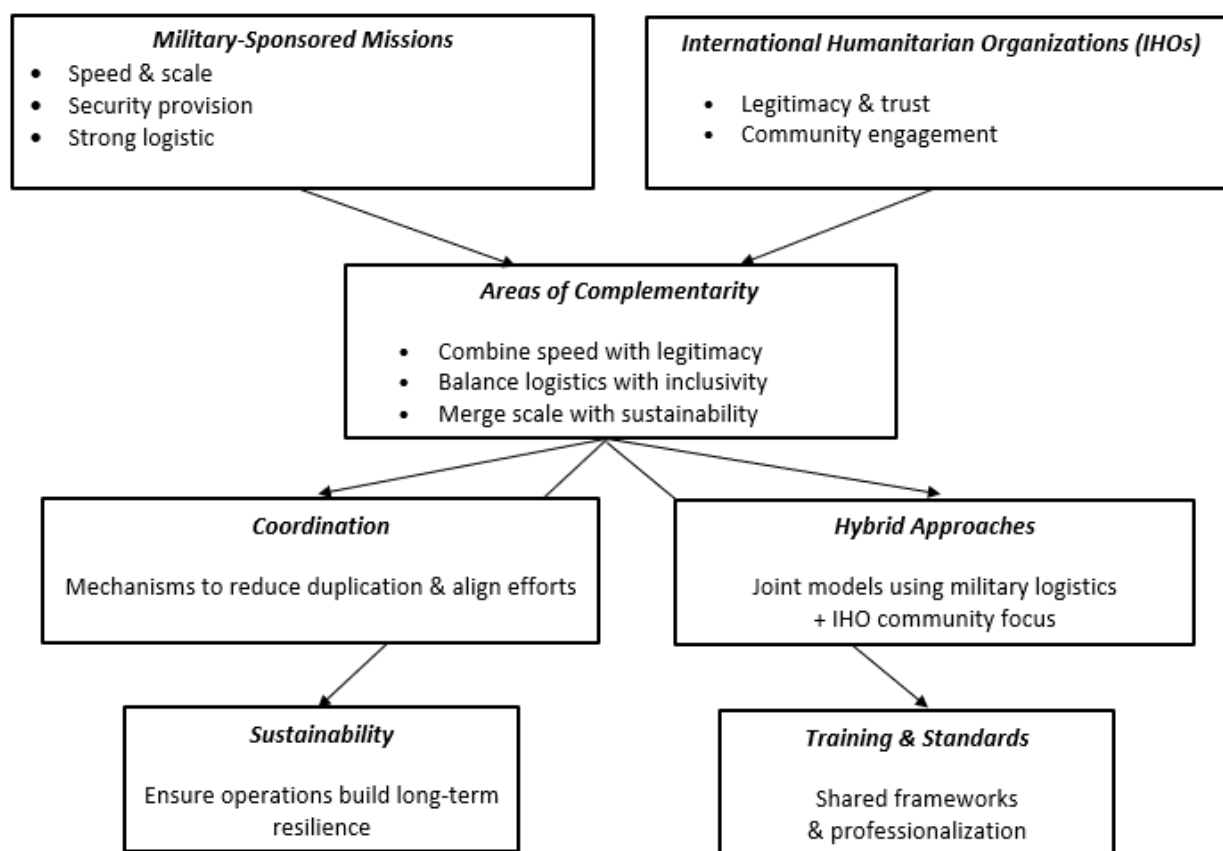| Dimension	Military Perceptions	IHO Perceptions
Source of Perceptions	Perceived as extensions of state/foreign policy; risk of politicization	Legitimacy derived from neutrality, impartiality, independence
Strengths	Can provide access and operate in insecure, hostile environments	Trusted by communities and actors; access to contested areas; uphold humanitarian space
Limitations	Aid perceived as strategic tool; undermines neutrality and trust; may endanger aid workers	Lack of security capacity; must withdraw when threats escalate

4.7.　What we understand

This comparative analysis demonstrates that while military and IHO approaches differ significantly across dimensions of command, resources, stakeholder engagement, adaptability, and legitimacy, both bring indispensable strengths to humanitarian operations (Burkle et *al*., 2014; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). Militaries excel in scale, speed, and security, while IHOs bring legitimacy, community engagement, and adaptability. The challenge lies not in choosing one over the other but in developing complementary approaches that integrate military logistical capacity with IHO humanitarian principles (Dubey et *al*., 2019).

5. Implications for Humanitarian Project Management

5.1.　Context

The comparative analysis of military-sponsored humanitarian missions and international humanitarian organizations (IHOs) demonstrates that both actors possess unique strengths and face inherent limitations (Burkle et *al*., 2014; Moshtari, 2016; Bollettino & Anders, 2020). The challenge for humanitarian project management lies not in privileging one approach over the other but in identifying areas of complementarity where synergy can improve efficiency, legitimacy, and sustainability of humanitarian operations. Four critical implications emerge: coordination, hybrid approaches, sustainability, and training and standards (Balcik et *al*., 2010; Kovács & Tatham, 2010).

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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**Figure 08. Complementarity of Military Missions and IHOs
in Humanitarian Project Management**

5.2. Coordination

Effective humanitarian response requires structured coordination mechanisms that bring together military logistical capacity and NGO legitimacy.

The Coordination Gap

Historically, humanitarian crises have been plagued by coordination challenges, resulting in duplication of efforts or unmet needs. During the 2010 Haiti earthquake response, hundreds of NGOs operated independently, while military forces, primarily the U.S. military-managed air traffic control and logistics at Port-au-Prince airport (Tatham & Kovács, 2010; Balcik et *al.*, 2010; Cozzolino, 2012b; Moshtari, 2016; Bollettino & Anders, 2020; CRED & UNDRR, 2020). The lack of joint planning led to bottlenecks: military aircraft prioritized strategic deliveries, while humanitarian cargo was delayed, frustrating NGOs and slowing aid distribution (Kovács & Tatham, 2010).

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Coordination Models

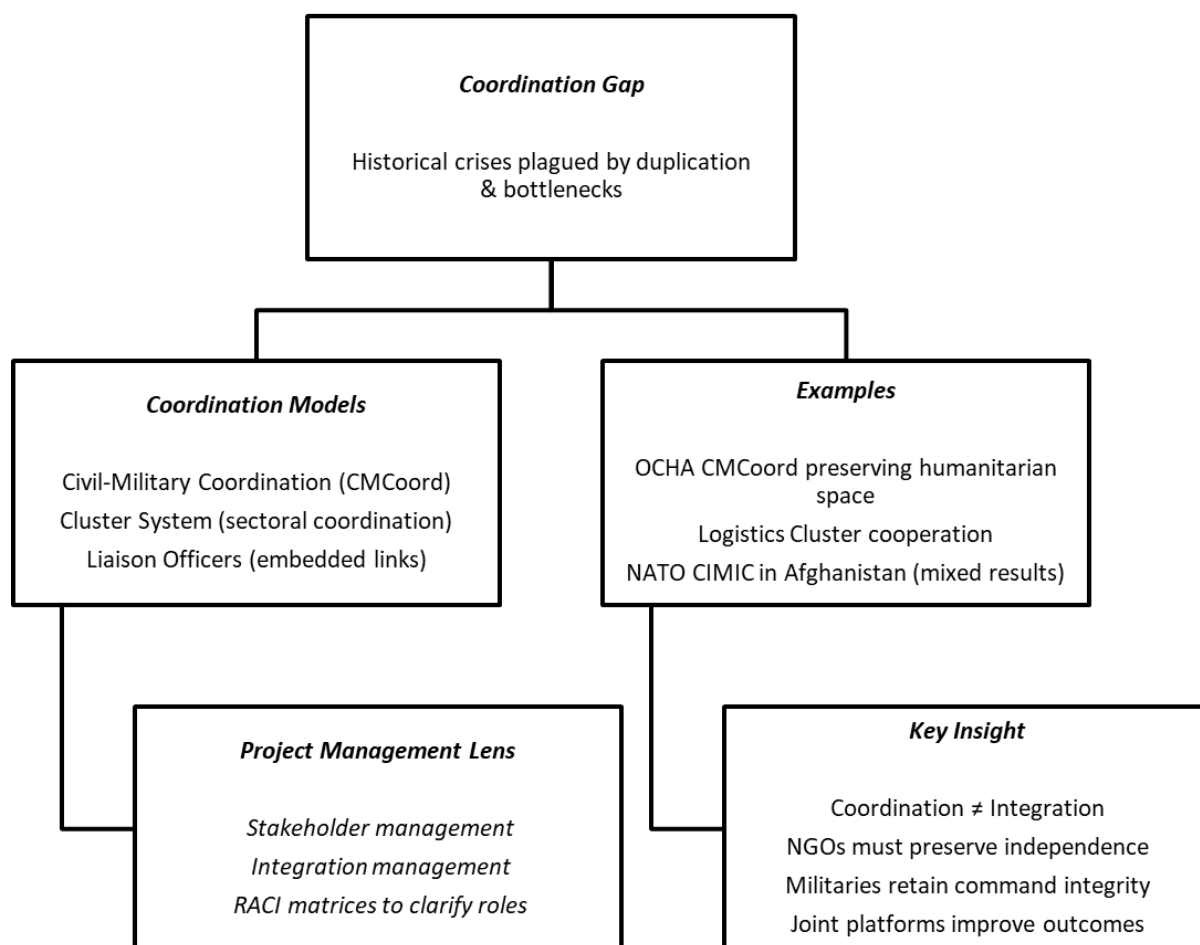Several models have been proposed to bridge these divides:

- **Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord):** Promoted by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), this framework facilitates structured dialogue between military and civilian actors while preserving humanitarian space (OCHA, 2010; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).
- **Cluster System:** Introduced after the 2005 humanitarian reform, the cluster system groups actors by sector (e.g. health, shelter, logistics). Militaries sometimes engage with clusters, particularly the Logistics Cluster, to share information and align activities (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005; Balcik et *al.*, 2010; Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Cozzolino, 2012b).
- **Liaison Officers:** Embedding liaison officers from militaries into humanitarian coordination hubs, and vice versa, has improved communication. For example, in Afghanistan, NATO established civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) units to coordinate with NGOs, although results were mixed (Bollettino & Anders, 2020; CRED & UNDRR, 2020).

Project Management Perspective

From a project management standpoint, coordination reflects stakeholder management and integration management as defined by PMI (2021). Effective humanitarian projects require mapping of stakeholders, identification of inter-dependencies, and establishment of communication plans (Burkle et *al.*, 2014). Military-NGO coordination can benefit from tools such as RACI matrices (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) to clarify roles and reduce duplication (Altay & Green, 2006; Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

Key Insight

Coordination does not imply integration. NGOs must maintain independence to preserve legitimacy, while militaries must retain command integrity. However, structured platforms for information-sharing, joint needs assessments, and logistics planning can significantly improve outcomes (Balcik et *al.*, 2010; Cozzolino, 2012b).

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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Figure 09. Coordination in Humanitarian Operations: Military & IHOs

5.3.   Hybrid Approaches

A second implication is the need for hybrid humanitarian approaches that combine the strengths of militaries and NGOs.

Division of Labor

In hybrid approaches, militaries provide large-scale infrastructure and security, while NGOs focus on community engagement, service delivery, and needs assessment. For example, during the 2014 Ebola crisis in Liberia and Sierra Leone, U.S. and U.K. military forces constructed treatment centers and provided logistical support, while NGOs like MSF operated the centers, delivering medical care (Dubey et *al*., 2019; Bollettino & Anders, 2020; CRED & UNDRR, 2020). This division of labor leveraged the comparative advantage of both actors.

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

Humanitarian Operations in Project Management
by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
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Project Management Synergy

Hybrid approaches align with the project management concept of resource optimization. Militaries contribute capital-intensive resources (aircraft, engineering, medical units), while NGOs contribute human resources with specialized expertise and cultural knowledge (Richey et *al*., 2009; Burkle et *al*., 2014). By integrating these assets, humanitarian projects can achieve both scale and legitimacy (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Moshtari, 2016).

Challenges of Hybrid Models

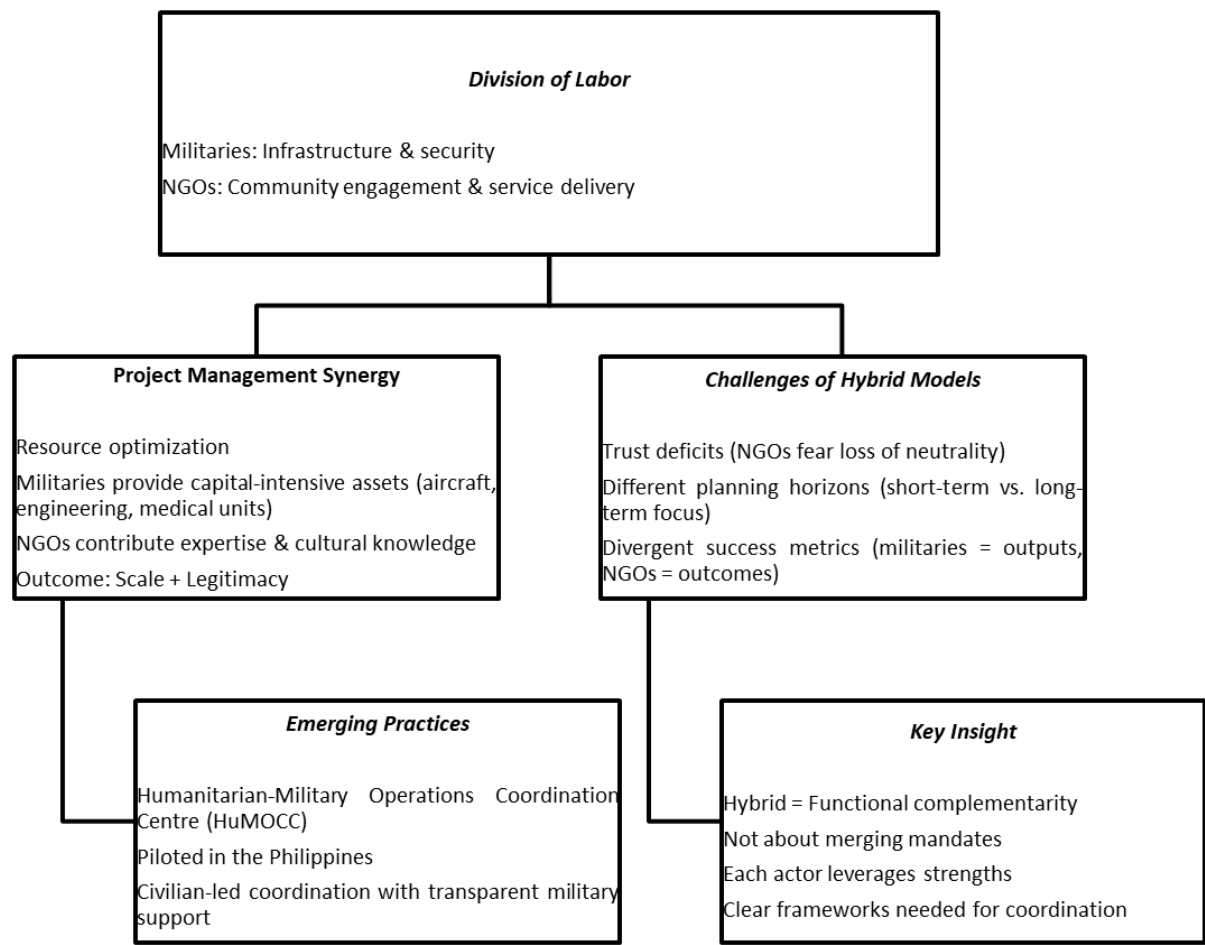Despite potential benefits, hybrid approaches face obstacles:

- **Trust deficits:** NGOs may fear loss of neutrality if perceived as collaborating too closely with militaries (Rieff, 2002).
- **Different planning horizons:** Militaries operate on short-term deployment cycles, while NGOs emphasize long-term resilience (Burkle et *al*., 2014).
- **Divergent metrics of success:** Militaries measure outputs (tons of aid delivered, infrastructure rebuilt), while NGOs measure outcomes (improved health, community empowerment).

Emerging Practices

Hybrid models are becoming more sophisticated. For example, the Humanitarian-Military Operations Coordination Centre (HuMOCC**)**, first piloted in the Philippines, integrates military logistical support into civilian-led coordination frameworks, ensuring transparency while preserving humanitarian principles (Grace et *al*., 2023).

Key Insight

Hybrid approaches are not about merging mandates but about functional complementarity, allowing each actor to do what they do best while coordinating activities through clear frameworks (Balcik et *al.*, 2010).

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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by Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE
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Figure 09. Hybrid Humanitarian Approaches: Combining Military & NGO Strengths

5.4. Sustainability

Humanitarian operations often focus on immediate relief, but long-term sustainability requires strategic planning across both military and NGO interventions.

The Short-Term Bias

Military missions typically prioritize rapid stabilization and short-term visibility. For instance, after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, the U.S. military delivered massive amounts of aid within two weeks but quickly withdrew once immediate needs were met (Grace et *al*., 2023). NGOs, left with limited resources, struggled to sustain recovery programs (Kovács & Tatham, 2010; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).

NGOs, meanwhile, often operate under short donor funding cycles, forcing them to focus on immediate outputs rather than systemic resilience (Moshtari, 2016). The result is a cycle of temporary relief without durable recovery.

Toward Sustainable Project Management

Project management theory emphasizes triple constraints (time, cost, scope) but also increasingly integrates sustainability dimensions (PMI, 2021). For humanitarian projects, sustainability involves (Burkle et *al*., 2014):

- **Capacity building:** Training local staff and institutions to take over after external actors depart.
- **Local procurement:** Stimulating local markets instead of relying on imported aid.
- **Exit strategies:** Designing projects with clear handover plans to local authorities or communities.
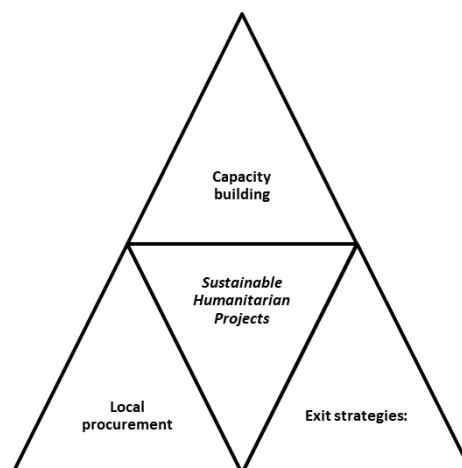
Figure 10. Sustainable Humanitarian Projects

Joint Opportunities

Militaries can extend sustainability by integrating capacity-building objectives into their missions. For example, engineering units can train local workers while rebuilding infrastructure, leaving behind skills and not just physical assets (Moshtari, 2016). NGOs, on the other hand, could partner with militaries for structured logistical agreements that provide surge capacity during crises while keeping core operations community-centered (Altay & Green, 2006).
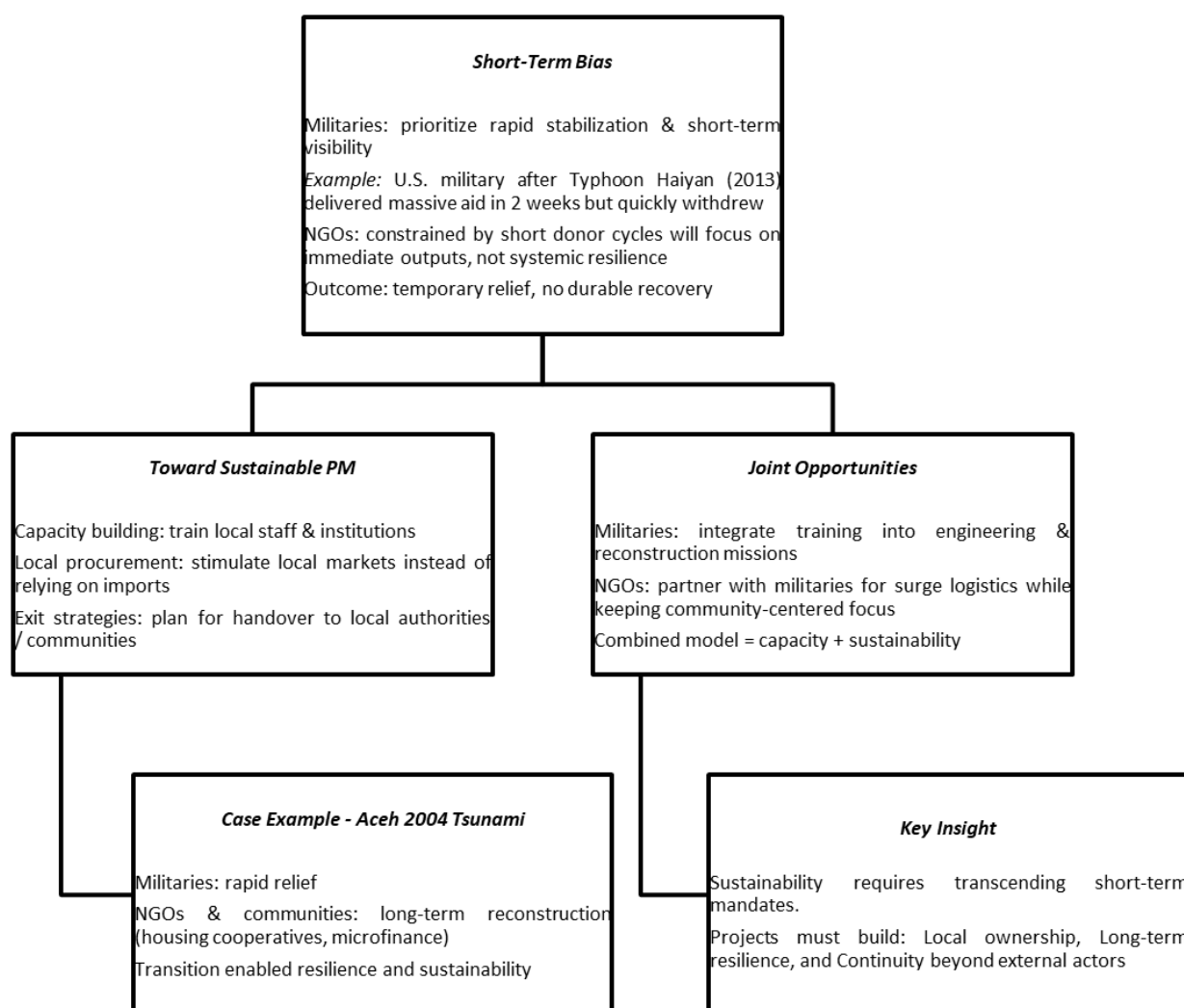
Case Example

In Aceh, Indonesia, after the 2004 tsunami, military forces provided rapid initial relief, but NGOs and community-based organizations took over reconstruction, emphasizing resilience through housing cooperatives and microfinance programs (Elleman, 2007). The lesson: sustainability

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
www.pmworldjournal.com

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emerges when militaries and NGOs transition effectively between relief and recovery phases (Scheper, 2006).

Key Insight

Sustainability requires both actors to transcend short-term mandates and design projects that build local ownership, resilience, and continuity.

Short-Term Bias

Militaries: prioritize rapid stabilization & short-term visibility

Example: U.S. military after Typhoon Haiyan (2013) delivered massive aid in 2 weeks but quickly withdrew

NGOs: constrained by short donor cycles will focus on immediate outputs, not systemic resilience

Outcome: temporary relief, no durable recovery

Toward Sustainable PM

Capacity building: train local staff & institutions

Local procurement: stimulate local markets instead of relying on imports

Exit strategies: plan for handover to local authorities / communities

Joint Opportunities

Militaries: integrate training into engineering & reconstruction missions

NGOs: partner with militaries for surge logistics while keeping community-centered focus

Combined model = capacity + sustainability

Case Example - Aceh 2004 Tsunami

Militaries: rapid relief

NGOs & communities: long-term reconstruction (housing cooperatives, microfinance)

Transition enabled resilience and sustainability

Key Insight

Sustainability requires transcending short-term mandates.

Projects must build: Local ownership, Long-term resilience, and Continuity beyond external actors

Figure 11. Sustainability in Humanitarian Operations: Military & INGOs Interventions

5.5.   Training and Standards

A final implication concerns the need for shared training and standardized frameworks to improve interoperability between militaries and NGOs.

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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The Interoperability Gap

A recurring barrier to effective collaboration is the lack of mutual understanding between civilian and military actors (Bollettino & Anders, 2020). Militaries often view NGOs as disorganized and slow, while NGOs perceive militaries as politicized and rigid. These cultural differences create friction in joint operations.

Standardization Initiatives

Several initiatives have sought to bridge this gap:

- **Sphere Standards:** Developed by NGOs, the Sphere Handbook outlines minimum standards for humanitarian response (Sphere Association, 2018). Militaries that adopt these standards in joint missions can align more closely with humanitarian principles.
- **UN Civil-Military Guidelines:** OCHA's guidelines provide frameworks for interaction that preserve humanitarian space while allowing operational collaboration (OCHA, 2010; Moshtari, 2016).
- **Joint Exercises:** Increasingly, militaries and NGOs participate in joint simulation exercises. For example, the U.S. military's Pacific Partnership annual exercise brings together naval forces, NGOs, and host nations to practice disaster response coordination (Balcik et *al.*, 2010; Cozzolino, 2012a; Bollettino & Anders, 2020).
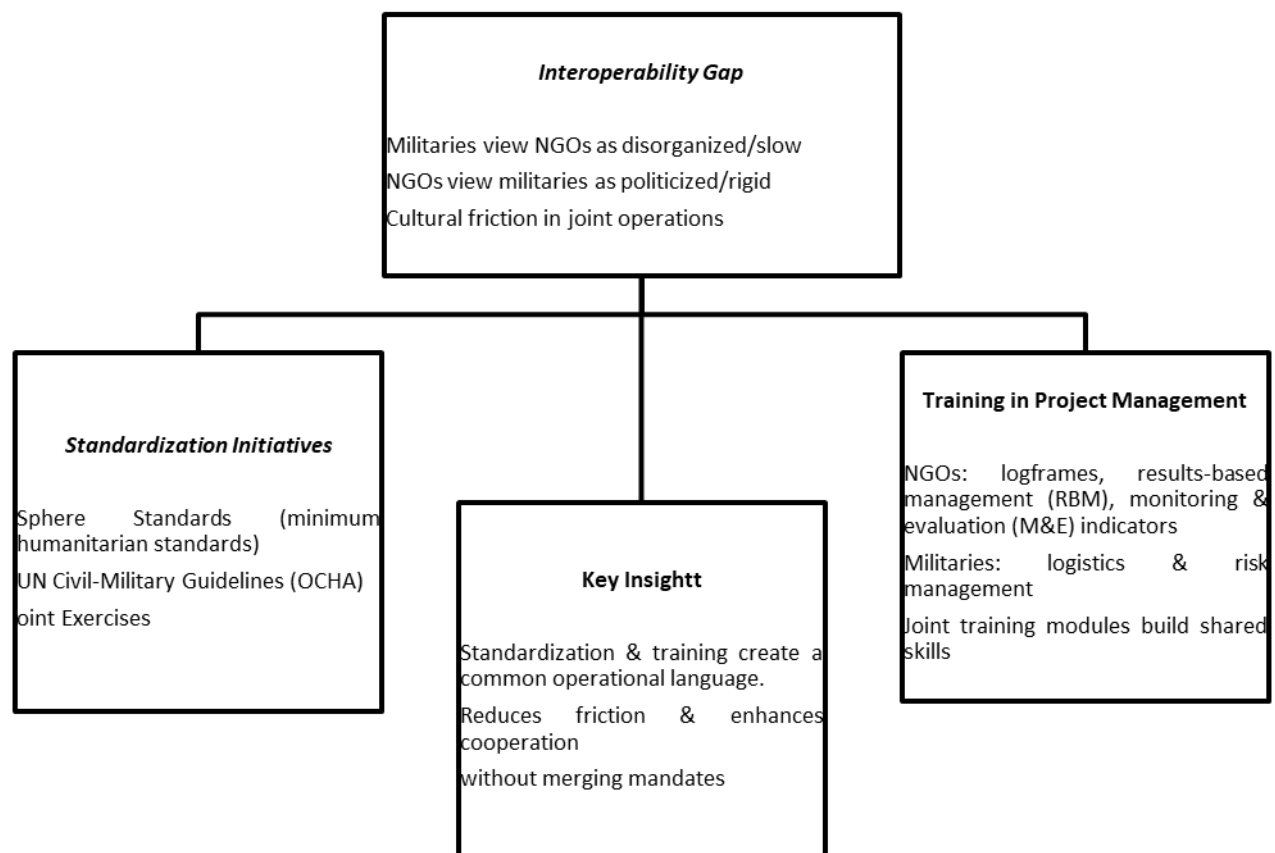
Training in Project Management

Shared training in humanitarian project management methodologies can also enhance interoperability. Concepts such as logical frameworks (logframes), results-based management, and monitoring & evaluation indicators are widely used by NGOs but less familiar to militaries. Conversely, militaries' project management strengths in logistics and risk management could benefit NGO staff if integrated into joint training modules (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005; Tatham & Kovács, 2010; Cozzolino, 2012b; Burkle et *al*., 2014).

Key Insight

Standardization and training do not erase differences in mandates but create a common operational language. By aligning processes where possible, both actors can reduce friction and enhance cooperation during real crises.

5.6.   Highlights of Comparative Analysis

The implications of comparative analysis highlight that humanitarian project management must evolve toward coordination, hybrid functional models, sustainability planning, and standardized training. Militaries bring unmatched logistical power and security capacity, while NGOs contribute legitimacy, adaptability, and community engagement (Balcik et *al.*, 2010). By strategically aligning these strengths, humanitarian actors can deliver faster, more legitimate, and more sustainable outcomes.

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Figure 12. Training & Standards: Enhancing Military-NGO Interoperability

6. Conclusion

6.1. Outline

Humanitarian operations exist at the intersection of urgency, complexity, and human dignity. They demand project management approaches that are capable of addressing immediate needs while laying the groundwork for longer-term recovery. Military-sponsored missions and international humanitarian organizations (IHOs) bring different strengths and weaknesses to this field. The comparative analysis of their practices suggests that the future of humanitarian project management must rest on complementarity, collaboration, and innovation. This conclusion synthesizes the findings into five subparts: summary of key differences, lessons learned, toward complementarity, implications for policy and practice, and directions for future research.

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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6.2.   Summary of Key Differences

The analysis across Sections 2-4 highlights clear contrasts between the two paradigms:

- **Mandates and Principles.** Militaries operate under national interests and political directives, while IHOs follow humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence.
- **Command and Control.** Military structures are hierarchical and centralized, ensuring efficiency and discipline. IHOs employ decentralized and participatory systems, fostering inclusivity but sometimes at the expense of speed.
- **Resources.** Militaries possess unmatched logistical capacity, engineering support, and security forces. IHOs operate within donor-dependent budgets but excel at innovating through local procurement and participatory planning.
- **Flexibility.** Militaries adhere to rigid standard operating procedures, limiting adaptability. IHOs are highly adaptive and context-specific, though often constrained in scale.
- **Perceptions.** Military aid risks being seen as politically motivated, undermining neutrality. IHOs derive legitimacy through independence, but their access may be limited by security risks.

Table 17. Comparison of Military vs. IHO Paradigms in Project Management

Dimension	Militaries	International Humanitarian Organizations (IHOs)
Mandates & Principles	Guided by national interests and political directives	Guided by humanitarian principles: neutrality, impartiality, independence
Command & Control	Hierarchical, centralized; ensures efficiency and discipline	Decentralized, participatory; fosters inclusivity but may reduce speed
Resources	Strong logistics, engineering, and security capacity	Donor-dependent budgets; innovative with local procurement and participatory planning
Flexibility	Rigid standard operating procedures; limited adaptability	Highly adaptive and context-specific; constrained in scale
Perceptions	Aid may be viewed as politically motivated; neutrality questioned	Legitimacy from independence; access can be limited by security risks
Project Management Emphasis	Efficiency, speed, mission accomplishment	Legitimacy, accountability, sustainability

These differences shape project management practices in profound ways. Militaries emphasize efficiency and speed, while IHOs emphasize legitimacy, accountability, and sustainability.

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Vol. XIV, Issue IX – September 2025
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6.3.   Lessons Learned from Past Humanitarian Operations

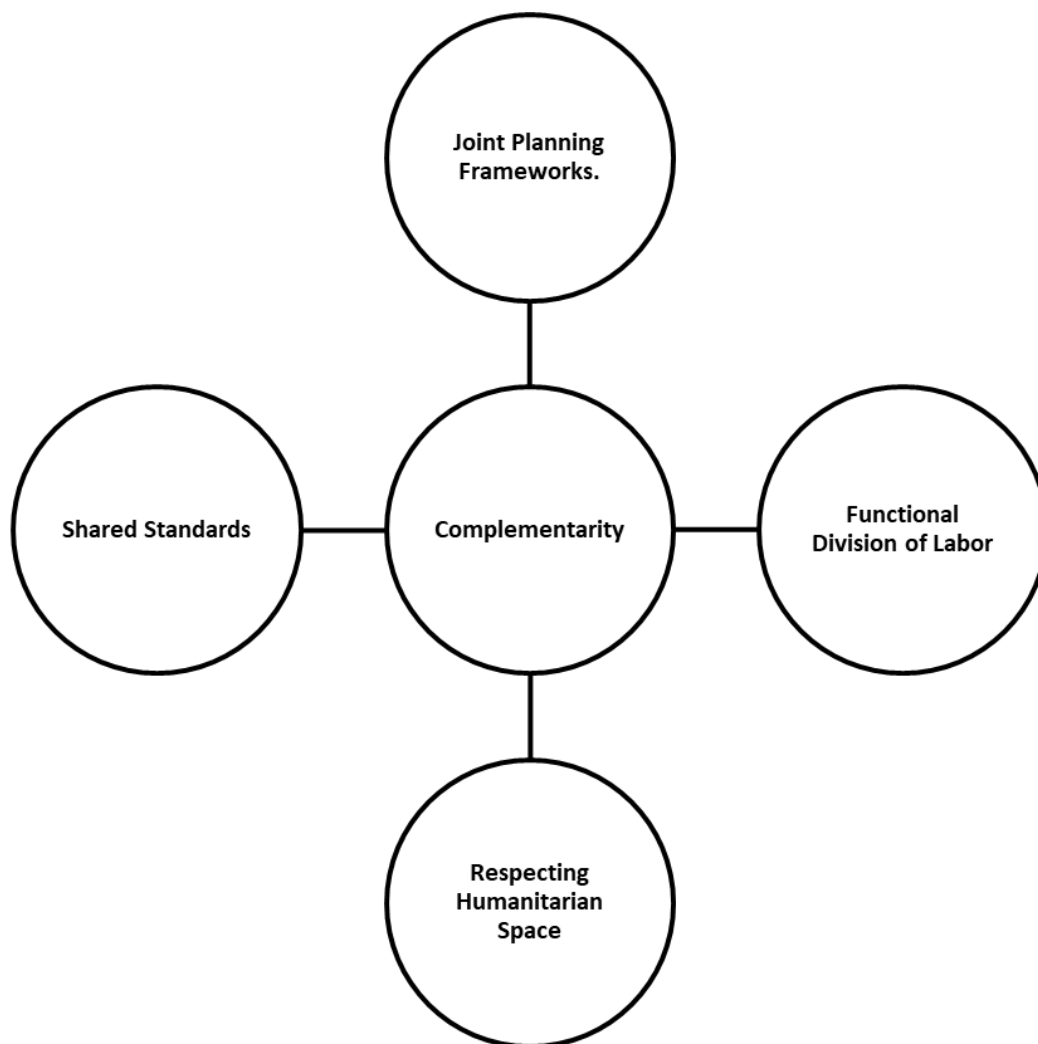Several case studies demonstrate how these differences manifest in real-world crises:

- **2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami.** Militaries, particularly the U.S. Navy, provided large-scale airlifts and engineering support, enabling rapid aid delivery. NGOs, however, played the critical role of tailoring assistance to community needs, from housing reconstruction to livelihood restoration.
- **2010 Haiti Earthquake.** Military forces controlled airport logistics, ensuring order, but delays in coordination with NGOs resulted in bottlenecks. NGOs eventually adapted programming to local conditions, shifting from in-kind aid to cash-based interventions.
- **2014 Ebola Crisis.** Militaries provided infrastructure and logistical support for treatment centers, while NGOs delivered medical care. The hybrid approach demonstrated functional complementarity.

These examples illustrate that no single actor can address all dimensions of a humanitarian crisis alone. Militaries provide scale and speed, but NGOs bring legitimacy and adaptability. When coordination falters, effectiveness suffers; when synergy is achieved, humanitarian outcomes improve.

6.4.   Toward Complementarity and Collaboration

The future of humanitarian project management lies in **complementarity**, leveraging the comparative advantages of both militaries and IHOs without undermining humanitarian principles.

- **Joint Planning Frameworks.** Militaries and IHOs must engage in joint scenario planning and needs assessments. By aligning priorities early, duplication can be avoided, and resources can be better allocated.
- **Functional Division of Labor.** Militaries should focus on large-scale logistics, security, and infrastructure, while NGOs manage community engagement, needs assessments, and long-term recovery.
- **Respecting Humanitarian Space.** Collaboration must be carefully managed to preserve NGO neutrality. Civil-military coordination mechanisms (such as UN OCHA's CMCoord) provide useful frameworks for this balance.
- **Shared Standards.** Adopting common project management standards, such as Sphere guidelines or results-based management, ensures interoperability while respecting different mandates.

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Figure 13. Complementarity and Collaboration between Militaries and IHOs in Humanitarian Project Management

In essence, collaboration is not about merging roles but about building bridges between efficiency and legitimacy.

6.5.   Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings also carry significant implications for policymakers, donors, and humanitarian practitioners:

1. **Policy Integration.** National governments should integrate humanitarian assistance policies that allow militaries and NGOs to complement each other. This requires creating clear boundaries and coordination platforms that prevent militarization of aid while leveraging military assets effectively.

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2. **Donor Priorities.** Donors can incentivize collaboration by funding joint initiatives that require military-NGO coordination, such as prepositioned logistics hubs managed by NGOs but supported by military engineering.
3. **Capacity Building.** Militaries can contribute to long-term sustainability by training local actors during operations, while NGOs should strengthen their logistical capabilities through partnerships with defense institutions.
4. **Project Management Education.** Both militaries and NGOs would benefit from shared training programs in humanitarian project management, emphasizing tools like stakeholder analysis, risk management, and monitoring & evaluation.

These steps can create institutionalized collaboration, moving beyond ad hoc cooperation during crises.

Table 18. Implications for Policymakers, Donors, and Humanitarian Practitioners

Area of Implication	Key Recommendation	Practical Outcome
Policy Integration	Develop policies that enable complementarity between militaries and NGOs, with clear boundaries and coordination platforms	Prevents militarization of aid while leveraging military assets effectively
Donor Priorities	Incentivize collaboration by funding joint initiatives (e.g. NGO-managed hubs with military support)	Enhances resource efficiency and operational preparedness
Capacity Building	Militaries to train local actors; NGOs to strengthen logistics via defense partnerships	Builds local sustainability and improves response capacity
Project Management Education	Create shared training programs for militaries and NGOs in humanitarian project management	Fosters common language, tools, and practices (stakeholder analysis, M&E, risk management)

6.6. Directions for Future Research

Finally, this study points toward areas where further research can advance both theory and practice:

- **Hybrid Project Management Models.** More research is needed on hybrid frameworks that combine military logistical methodologies with NGO participatory planning.
- **Impact of Perceptions.** Studies should explore how perceptions of neutrality influence beneficiary trust and aid effectiveness when militaries and NGOs collaborate.

- **Technology and Innovation.** Research into digital tools (such as GIS mapping, blockchain for aid tracking, and AI for logistics optimization) can inform both military and NGO project management.
- **Measuring Sustainability.** Future research should evaluate long-term impacts of military-NGO collaboration, particularly on community resilience and local ownership.
- **Ethical Considerations.** Scholars must continue interrogating the ethical dilemmas of military involvement in humanitarian assistance, balancing sovereignty, politics, and humanitarian principles.

Figure 14. Directions for Future Research

By advancing these areas, academia can contribute directly to the evolution of humanitarian project management as both a discipline and a practice.

6.7.   Final Reflection

Humanitarian operations represent a critical domain where project management is not merely a technical skill but a life-saving practice. Militaries and international humanitarian organizations embody distinct paradigms shaped by their mandates, cultures, and resources. Militaries excel in speed, scale, and security but risk undermining neutrality and sustainability. IHOs prioritize legitimacy, inclusivity, and adaptability but face logistical and funding constraints.

The path forward is not to privilege one model over the other but to synthesize their strengths through structured collaboration. By combining military capacity with humanitarian legitimacy,

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humanitarian actors can achieve outcomes that are both effective and principled. Future project management in humanitarian operations must therefore embrace coordination, complementarity, sustainability, and shared standards, ensuring that the collective goal of alleviating human suffering remains paramount.

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