

Humanitarian drones: useful tool, toxic image

Michiel Hofman • Médecins Sans Frontières

Undoubtedly it is technological tools that crystallize fantasies of efficiency and the greatest ambiguities the most. Drones induce multiple confusions – between civil and military use, interests of populations, NGOs and companies that do not always converge – that Michiel Hofman decrypts for us.

Drones do not have a good reputation. Yet there are numerous useful applications of such technology for humanitarian purposes: conflict zones, and other difficult-to-reach places when disaster strikes, could be well served by accurate assessments of population movements or accurate data on crop yields to detect early famine warnings. Needs could be assessed rapidly during natural disasters such as floods, mudslides or earthquakes. Drones come in all shapes and sizes: from small indoor toys to huge aerial combat vehicles such as the Predator drones used by the United States for its targeted killing programme. Especially for people living in conflict zones, it is this Predator image rather than the toy-store variety that is part of their daily reality.

One of the reasons armed groups in contemporary conflict are reluctant to give access to foreign aid workers is the fear that the foreigner's presence will attract aerial attacks. This is not new: as technology has advanced, fear for this new technology has advanced as well: from the laser-guided Russian rockets in Chechnya in the nineties, to the cruise missile attacks in Iraq and Sudan in 2003 and 2004, up to the current combat drones used in countries like Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan.

Military drones marketed for humanitarian purposes

Humanitarian organisations have started to use drone technology as well. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is no exception, experimenting with small drone equipment for surveillance in Liberia during the Ebola outbreak and in the Philippines during the response to the Typhoon Haiyan. In Papua New Guinea¹, MSF used drones to collect blood samples from remote villages. The argument goes that these contexts are far from the area of deployment of the feared Predator drones, that the technology used is small, cheap and unsuitable for military purposes, and the deployment is mostly done in a low-profile manner.

This all changed in 2015 when MSF started its “Search and Rescue” (SAR) operations in the Mediterranean Sea in response to the high death toll amongst migrants attempting the perilous journey by sea from North Africa to Europe. Unexpectedly, unplanned and uninvited, the name of MSF and its logo became associated with the gathering of military intelligence for the European Union-led military “Search and Destroy” (SAD) mission against people smugglers. Around the same time, MSF's name and logo were used to market military drones for a

¹ Médecins Sans Frontières, “Innovating to Fight Tuberculosis in Papua New Guinea”, 14 November 2014, www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/news/innovating-fight-tuberculosis-papua-new-guinea

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humanitarian clientele. This development was not intended: MSF first started its involvement in rescue at sea – traditionally not an area of expertise of a medical organisation – by partnering with an existing Search and Rescue organisation, only taking responsibility for medical services once the migrants were safely on board. The partner organisation, Migrant Offshore Assistance Station (MOAS), was using drone technology to locate boats adrift with migrants, in partnership with a military drone manufacturer Schiebel – whose participation was clearly aimed at reducing negative press about drones: “You know, a lot of people get really upset when they hear about drones, because all you hear about is drones killing people. We wanted to change that dynamic”, said Chris Catrambone, the founder of MOAS.

It was also a Schiebel drone (the same model as was used by MOAS) that was shot down by the Libyan army in January 2015², because this Schiebel S100 surveillance drone – euphemistically called Camcopter – has come under scrutiny for its ability to easily be converted into a drone that can fire missiles. This Camcopter is one of the most prolifically used drones in the world, serving in at least 11 militaries. Initially the MOAS website proudly displayed the partnership with MSF alongside the logos of Schiebel and a Marine oil company as “sponsors” of MOAS. This has since been rectified. However, MOAS has also been using this new partnership to promote its association with the drone manufacturer. The founder of MOAS, who owns an insurance/risk management/intelligence company called Tangiers³, based in Malta, on his blog for MOAS in March 2018 published an article called “Humanitarian Drones: Bots Without Borders”⁴. Up to this point, it could all have been put down to an unfortunate misunderstanding, as the Schiebel/MSF co-sponsoring website was quickly removed and, after discussions with MOAS, MSF formally dissociated itself from the drone aspect of an otherwise mutually beneficial partnership. However, this was not to be.

The MOAS/MSF operations launch was high-profile with invited press at the first departure of the joint rescue operation. Some of the Italian and British press present reported that data from the MOAS/MSF drone was shared with Italian law enforcement agencies in order to identify smugglers⁵. Within weeks of this report, the European Union, following a few widely reported mass drowning disasters, came together in a crisis meeting to discuss their response. They decided to go for a military solution: the EU adopted a deterrence policy, combining an expanded military “Search and Rescue” capacity with a military “Search and Destroy” campaign. The data obtained from surveillance and rescue operations were collected in order to attack the smugglers and their boats. This decision meant that data shared with the Italian authorities could now be considered military intelligence. The militarisation of the Mediterranean search and rescue gave MSF the dubious accolade of being the first major international humanitarian organisation to be associated with military grade drone equipment inside a military zone. The partnership between MSF and MOAS ended in September 2015 when the vessel, the Phoenix, was redeployed to the Andaman Sea in South-East Asia. However, the ever-pragmatic MSF re-engaged with the Phoenix in 2018, leasing the vessel for an MSF-led SAR operation, although this time without the MOAS team and its infamous drone.

² Dylan Malyasov, “Austrian-made UAV Schiebel Camcopter S-100 Shot Down in Libya”, Defence Blog, 15 January 2015, <https://defence-blog.com/news/austrian-made-uav-schiebel-camcopter-s-100-shot-down-in-libya.html>

³ www.tangiersgroup.com

⁴ Christopher Catrambone, “Humanitarian Drones: Bots Without Borders”, 17 March 2018, www.christophercatrambone.com/humanitarian-drones-bots-without-borders

⁵ Hannah Roberts, “Drones help trap Mediterranean smuggler for the first time: Police arrest suspected people trafficker after images showed him at helm of boat carrying migrants”, MailOnline, 6 May 2015, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3070890/

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Since December 2013, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Monusco) has been using “Unmanned Aerial Vehicles” (UAV) to gather military intelligence. This is the second time the UN has used this technology for UN peacekeeping operations. After some lower profile trials in Côte d’Ivoire in 2011 the UN launched the drones for Monusco with a press appearance in Goma by Hervé Ladsous, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, proudly posing on the tarmac of Goma airport beside the newly commissioned white drones porting the UN logo. When the initial buzz of the launch was over, the first trials did not go well, and the Italian-made drone crashed unceremoniously next to Goma airstrip six weeks later⁶, followed by a second crash north of the city nine months later⁷.

In July 2014, the United Nations humanitarian office (Unocha) called on all aid agencies in Goma to discuss the possibility of using these drones to conduct humanitarian surveillance. An Ocha proposal for the use of drone technology was presented as an opportunity for the aid agencies to gather information on humanitarian issues like population displacement. This could be done in conjunction with the primary objective of the “UAVs” – the word “drone” is carefully avoided in official UN documents – which is to gather military intelligence for both the UN forces and the Congolese Army it supports. One problem was the cost: this UN drone apparently costs around 15 million US dollars per year, so the UN expected to “recover” part of this expense from the aid agencies, meaning the NGOs had to pay the UN for the drone.

This mixing of humanitarian and military use is especially problematic in DRC, which is the only country where the UN peacekeeping force has an official offensive mandate since the introduction of a “Intervention Brigade” in 2013. The UN Security Council resolution authorising this force has given it an explicit mandate to ‘neutralise and disarm’ groups opposing the authority of the State⁸. Mindful of this obvious conflict of interest, Ocha released an “occasional policy paper”⁹ prior to this request to its humanitarian partners in order to clarify its position, but achieved exactly the opposite. This document argues both against and in favour of using drone technology in conflict settings:

“Anxiety among the population would be particularly acute in contexts where drones are also conducting attacks and where the population may not be able to distinguish between armed and unarmed drones. For example, serious concerns have been raised about the broader impact of military UAVs in places like Pakistan, as families keep children home from school, religious and cultural practices are undermined, due to anxiety caused by the presence of military UAVs and the threat of attacks. In contexts like these, introducing additional UAVs to the area, even for humanitarian purposes, may cause more harm than good.”¹⁰

This convincing argument against dual military and humanitarian use of drones is then undermined in the next section on drones in UN peacekeeping operations, seemingly to make an exception for the situation in DRC:

⁶ “RDC: crash d’un drone de la Monusco à Goma”, *Jeune Afrique*, 15 January 2014, www.jeuneafrique.com/166206/politique/rdc-crash-d-un-drone-de-la-monusco-goma

⁷ “Crash d’un deuxième drone de la Monusco à Goma”, *France 24*, 21 October 2014, <http://observers.france24.com/fr/20141021-crash-drone-monusco-goma-rdcongo-surveillance>

⁸ “‘Intervention Brigade’ Authorized as Security Council Grants Mandate Renewal for United Nations Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo”, United Nations, 28 March 2013, www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc10964.doc.htm

⁹ UNOCHA, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Humanitarian Response, Occasional Policy Paper, Policy and studies series 10, June 2014, www.ehrha.org/news/ocha-uav-humanitarian-response

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

“There have already been discussions about adding UAV capacity to other UN missions, including those in Côte d’Ivoire, Sudan, and South Sudan. Humanitarian organisations that take a principled stand to reject military UAV capacities may even be criticized for not taking advantage of “life-saving technology”. [...] Opting not to use drones could indeed someday be considered a breach of international humanitarian law as a failure to take all measures to protect civilians and document violations.”

The response from the aid agencies present was predictable, but pertinent: they expressed a huge concern about mixing military objectives with humanitarian aid. How would a Congolese farmer in a remote village know when a UN drone comes to gather military intelligence, and when it comes for humanitarian purposes? How can any of the armed rebel groups, whom we expect to give unhindered access to humanitarians, continue to trust the humanitarian agencies when humanitarian assessments and military surveillance are combined? The aid agencies felt this confusion was taken to another level by introducing this white humanitarian/military drone bearing the UN logo into the mix. Working in an environment where it is already hard to distinguish between UN military resources engaged in offensive military actions and UN humanitarian resources on an aid mission, combining military intelligence and humanitarian surveillance with a technology already suffering a serious image problem was one step too far. The group of aid agencies expressed its objection, and Ocha had to abandon this attempt to obtain co-financing from the aid sector for a military drone.

All drones big and small on both sides of the “war on terror”

The US Predator drones, machines the size of a small aeroplane used for the “targeted killing programme” introduced as part of the “war on terror” launched after the 9/11 attack in New York, cemented the toxic image associated with the word “drone”.

Especially in Pakistan, the death toll of an almost continuous deployment has been enormous: under the Obama Presidency 542 such strikes were authorised, killing an estimated 4,000 people, 300 of whom were confirmed to be civilians¹¹. Such a sustained exposure also has a secondary effect where the mere presence of a drone creates a climate of fear and suspicion, a phenomenon chillingly documented by a former New York Times journalist who was held captive in the tribal region – FATA – where most of the US drone strikes in Pakistan take place: “The drones were terrifying. From the ground, it is impossible to determine who or what they are tracking as they circle overhead. The buzz of a distant propeller is a constant reminder of imminent death.”¹² But humanitarians are unlikely to ever use one of those aptly named, terrifying Predator or Reaper drones whose sight and sound installs such fears, so far limiting the use of this technology to the smaller, “toy” versions mostly in non-conflict settings.

These small machines are rapidly losing their innocence as well however, as they are easily accessible not only for aid agencies, but also non-State armed groups that do not have the means to acquire the larger ones.

¹¹ Anna Diakun, “Harm to Governmental Transparency”, in Ray Acheson, Matthew Bolton, Elizabeth Minor and Allison Pytlak (eds.), *The Humanitarian Impact of Drones*, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, International Disarmament Institute, Pace University, October 2017, 70.

¹² International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic (IHRCRC), *Living under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians from US Drone Practices in Pakistan*, Stanford Law School and Global Justice Clinic at NYU School of Law, 2012, 80, <http://www-cdn.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Stanford-NYU-LIVING-UNDER-DRONES.pdf>

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Islamic State (IS or ISIS) successfully deployed small domestic drones with grenades strapped underneath during the US-led offensives in Mosul and Raqqa in 2017¹³, and some reports even suggest Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region have managed to deploy a small drone¹⁴.

This leaves the image of humanitarian organisations such as MSF particularly vulnerable. Very quickly the reputation of the medium-sized “search and rescue” Camcopter on the MOAS/MSF ship became one of military drones deployed to hunt down and destroy people smugglers. The fact that MSF did not pay for the drone, that the MSF logo has been removed from the Schiebel/MOAS webpage, that MSF itself does not give information to the military authorities does not matter if people on the ground can no longer make the distinction between a drone there to help and a drone there to harm. The fact that all aid agencies in DRC rejected the UN dual military-humanitarian use of the Monusco drone does not matter either if the armed groups start to see humanitarians as the spy in the sky.

These negative associations with drones in DRC and the Mediterranean Sea are illustrative of the dangers of drone technology used by humanitarians, especially in conflict zones. MSF and others have used the technology, usually small portable devices outside of conflict areas. Drones can clearly be very useful, and their use for responses to natural disasters outside warzones is justifiable. But for humanitarian use in conflict zones, their image may just be too toxic.

Biography • Michiel Hofman

He worked for MSF in field missions between 1993 and 1998 as emergency coordinator and head of mission for MSF in Liberia, DRC, Bosnia, Burundi, Sri Lanka, Brazil, South Sudan and Kosovo, returning to his former career as freelance journalist between missions. Between 1999 and 2001, Michiel co-founded the Antares Foundation, a Dutch non-profit organisation which supports local NGOs in providing psychosocial support for staff working in high-stress environments. Michiel returned to MSF in 2001 working as country director in Russia, director of operations at MSF Amsterdam HQ and as country representative for Afghanistan. Since 2011, Michiel Hofman has been working as a senior humanitarian specialist for MSF based in Belfast, concentrating on research, training and operational support, as well as publications in the humanitarian field.

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¹³ “ISIS drones are attacking U.S. troops and disrupting airstrikes in Raqqa, officials say”, The Washington Post, 14 June 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/06/14/isis-drones-are-attacking-u-s-troops-and-disrupting-airstrikes-in-raqqa-officials-say/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6d1b483868c6 ; “Guess who has drones now? ISIS. And it disrupts the plans of the world’s most powerful military”, Vox, 30 May 2017, www.vox.com/world/2017/5/30/15686240/drones-isis-iraq-syria

¹⁴ “Boko Haram Terrorists Now Using Drones in Nigeria and Cameroon”, The Nigerian Voice, 4 September 2017, www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/256790/boko-haram-terrorists-now-using-drones-in-nigeria-and-camero.html