

THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE INDEX 2009



Whose Crisis? Clarifying Donor's Priorities

DARA



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Whose Crisis?

Clarifying Donor Priorities



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DARA – Development Assistance Research Associates – is an independent, international, non-profit organisation, which works to improve the quality and impact of development and humanitarian interventions. We do this through research, evaluations, promoting learning and knowledge sharing.

DARA aims to enhance global efforts to reduce human suffering and inequity and encourage prevention. Our focus is on the improvement of humanitarian action, the promotion of international stability and development, and the reduction of disaster risk.

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Crisis Reports
China





China at a Glance

Country data

- ▶ Population (2005): 1.31 billion
- ▶ Under five mortality rate (2006): 24 per 1,000
- ▶ Human Development Index Ranking (2008): 94
- ▶ Life expectancy (2006): 73 years
- ▶ Official Development Assistance (2007): US\$1.4 billion

The crisis

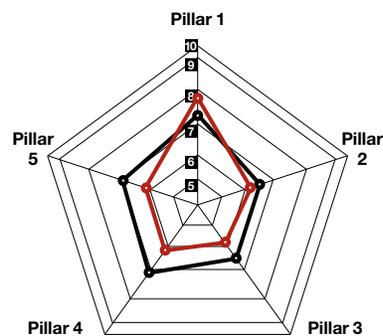
- ▶ Earthquake of magnitude 7.9 struck Wenchuan County in Sichuan on 12 May 2008; quake killed 87,150 people, injured 275,000, destroyed more than four million homes and left more than 40 million people requiring assistance;
- ▶ Chinese Government mobilised massive human and financial resources for relief and recovery operations;
- ▶ More than 360 billion Chinese yuan (US\$54 billion) were allocated for immediate relief operations and one trillion yuan (US\$150 billion) budgeted for reconstruction.

The response

- ▶ Response was mainly a national one; international donors and organisations asked to support in part to show 'openness' of the government, but also so Chinese authorities could learn from external actors;
- ▶ Strong government control of response complicated coordination and monitoring for INGOs and donor agencies, but overall the government's response was good;
- ▶ Extremely ambitious timetable for reconstruction and recovery, but some criticisms of missed opportunity to invest in preparedness and disaster risk-reduction measures.

Donor performance

- ▶ Main donors were internal; of the international response, OECD countries provided only 25 percent of funding compared with an average 97 percent to 99 percent in other humanitarian crises;
- ▶ OECD-DAC donors generally perceived as neutral, impartial and responding to needs (Pillar 1);
- ▶ Donors criticised for failing to support organisational capacity of relief agencies, especially regarding preparedness and long-term disaster risk-reduction initiatives.



HRI 2009 scores by pillar

- Pillar 1** Responding to needs
- Pillar 2** Prevention, risk reduction and recovery
- Pillar 3** Working with humanitarian partners
- Pillar 4** Protection and International Law
- Pillar 5** Learning and accountability

- China
- All crisis average

China

An Aid Giant in the Making?

John Cosgrave

The Sichuan earthquake of May 2008 left 87,150 people dead and 275,000 injured, and destroyed more than four million homes. In the wake of the disaster, China asked for international assistance, something which surprised members of the international community working in the country.

Aid workers interviewed by DARA in China viewed the request as being driven by:

- ▶ Politeness, so the international community would feel it had a role.
- ▶ Political considerations prompted by the negative reactions to the 'no assistance needed' policy of the Myanmar Government after Cyclone Nargis.
- ▶ The desire to improve its response by learning from experience gained elsewhere.
- ▶ The wish to develop China's own capacity to respond to such disasters in other countries.

China's calls for international assistance were clearly not aimed at funding. The Chinese Red Cross alone raised 65 billion yuan – about US\$9.5 billion. The Chinese Government planned to spend more than one trillion yuan (about US\$147 billion) on the reconstruction. This is more than the annual total of all official development assistance.

The Sichuan earthquake provides an interesting study in terms of good humanitarian donorship. China is a newly industrialised country, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is of crucial importance to the global economy, and of vital strategic interest. It is also a country with immense national resources, which it used freely in response to the earthquake. All of this raises questions about the role of donors in situations where countries do not need donor funding.

The quake and the aftermath

At 14:28² in the afternoon of 12 May 2008, Wenchuan County³ in Sichuan was struck by a magnitude 7.9 earthquake. The epicentre was about 80km west-north-west of the provincial capital Sichuan (USGS 2008).

Earthquakes are a well-known hazard in China. The magnitude 8 Shansi earthquake of 23 January 1556 is regarded by United States Geological Services as the deadliest earthquake of all time, with an estimated 830,000 fatalities. China was also the site of the deadliest earthquake of the 20th century: the magnitude 7.5 Tangshan earthquake of 27 July 1976 that killed 242,000.⁴

The behaviour of the Chinese Government after the Sichuan earthquake was in complete contrast to its attitude after the Tangshan earthquake 32 years earlier. In 1976, during the final year of Mao Zedong's life, the government allowed only a belated three-line confirmation of the quake from the official China news agency. The true scale of the human toll and devastation only emerged three years later, when officials quietly confirmed the scale of the disaster (Gowing 2009).

Some of our interviewees suggested that the negative international reaction to the behaviour of the Myanmar Government after Cyclone Nargis⁵ was one of the factors influencing the Chinese Government's relatively open policy (open by Chinese standards, that is). However, it was also clear that increasing openness, the growth of cell phone ownership,⁶ and rising internet access, meant that the Chinese Government simply did not have the option of treating this earthquake like the Tangshan one.

An immediate relief operation

The Chinese Government began an immediate relief operation, and the response remained a national one throughout. The Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, immediately travelled to the affected area and took several key decisions on the response, including the decision to deploy the military on a large scale. Some interviewees suggested that this was prompted in part by the very favourable public reaction to his appearances at train stations during winter storms to reassure travellers that the government was doing everything possible to get them home for the Chinese New Year holiday. The government deployed a large fleet of military helicopters and soldiers also carried relief items into inaccessible areas.

The funding for the response was also predominantly national. The Chinese Government had invested 360 billion yuan (about US\$52.7 billion) by April 2009.⁷ There were also large collections by the Chinese Red Cross Society as well as direct donations from twinned provinces and municipalities.

The combination of adequate funding and strong national determination means that China is now undergoing what is probably the fastest reconstruction following an earthquake of this scale. It seems likely that the ambitious targets set by the government for reconstruction (rural homes to be rebuilt by September 2009 and urban homes by May 2010) will be largely met (Xinhua News Agency 2009). The government announced that more than three-quarters of rural homes had been rebuilt by May 2009 and only 4.3 percent had yet to begin reconstruction (Yongrong and Yinan 2009).

The speed of reconstruction demonstrated the advantage that dictatorship brings in such crises—with no delays due to lengthy planning processes or public consultations. However, this speed also has its costs; reports in the Chinese media revealed that some local officials made life more difficult for the survivors in their eagerness to meet government targets (Reuters Foundation 2008).

Mainly Chinese funding

There were three main types of donation for the Sichuan earthquake:

- 1 Internal donations:** These were donations from within China, from private citizens, celebrities, companies and others. These donations were behind the huge amounts of money raised by the Chinese Red Cross.
- 2 ‘Solidarity’ donations:** These were donations from the Chinese community overseas.⁸ Chinese expat communities donated large amounts, and Chinese embassies overseas received contributions from these as well as from private individuals. The presence of an extensive Chinese community in Canada led to very large donations by the Canadian International Development Agency through its matching grants programme. Canadians donated CA\$11.6 million for Cyclone Nargis (which occurred first) and then some CA\$30 million for the Sichuan earthquake (CIDA 2008).

- 3 Corporate donations:** Seventy percent of Japanese Red Cross funding was provided by corporate donors. Because of previous tensions in the relationship between Japan and China over the Japanese occupation, Japanese corporations doing business in China were keen to be seen as acting generously – and worried that a small donation would be interpreted as a lack of concern for the Chinese people.

Corporate donations figured strongly within China itself and also in international fundraising. Some corporate donors abroad gave directly to the Chinese Red Cross, which received US\$30 million in foreign donations, half from the United States. Of the direct donations from the US, 80 percent came from corporate sources. Corporate donors also supported NGOs with, for example, Western Union matching US\$250,000 in contributions to the Mercy Corps website (Mercy Corps 2008).

One particularly useful donation was from Wells Fargo, which temporarily provided a free transfer service to China for clients in the US. However, interviewees were generally of the opinion that many corporate donations were driven by commercial calculation rather than by humanitarian concerns. They were perceived as signals to the Chinese Government and people rather than as expressions of humanitarian concern. This is similar to the political motives that sometimes drive donors’ allocation of funding.

Traditional donors played a very small part in the response. However, there was still room for some useful support, especially where it allowed agencies to bring learning from other emergency situations.

Unlike many similar crises, there was no gap between the ending of emergency funding and the start of recovery funding⁹ in the Sichuan earthquake. This is because the Chinese Government, from the earliest stages, understood that the earthquake response was not about providing relief, but about rebuilding livelihoods. There is a lesson here for the donor community.

Non-traditional donors

The problem for donors after the Sichuan earthquake was China’s enormous national resources, meaning the need for external financial assistance was effectively nil. Interviewees repeatedly emphasised the trivial scale of international contributions against the scale of national contributions.

When one examines the top seven donors it becomes clear that the chief donors are non-traditional donors and corporate donors.¹⁰

- 1 The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**
US\$76,199,510
- 2 Business Roundtable**
US\$57,986,680
- 3 United Arab Emirates**
US\$50,821,925
- 4 US–China Business Council**
US\$30,000,000
- 5 Canada** (matching funds)
US\$28,306,132
- 6 Russia** (all in kind)
US\$20,000,000
- 7 Central Emergency Response Fund**
US\$8,045,731

Only one OECD country appears in the top seven donors, and Canada features there because of the impact of providing matching funds to money raised by charities in a country with a large and prosperous Chinese community.¹¹ Two corporate collectives appear in the top seven.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) data shows that OECD countries, which normally account for 97 to 99 percent of humanitarian donations, accounted for just 25 percent of the pledges for the Sichuan earthquake, and that non-OECD countries accounted for 75 percent of the international funding for the Sichuan earthquake against three percent for all UN appeals in 2007.

All but two OECD members are shown by OCHA Financial Tracking Services (FTS) as contributing to the Sichuan appeal. The exceptions were Denmark and Mexico. Most OECD members contributed relatively small amounts for a disaster on this scale. With the exception of Germany, Italy and South Korea, all contributed less than US\$5 million.

It has to be presumed that the generous support by non-traditional donors owed more to China's strategic importance to them, rather than to particularly humanitarian concern. They were certainly not as generous with regard to the far greater unmet needs for Cyclone Nargis.

The low level of OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donor support for the individual agency appeals is appropriate given the general limited role of UN agencies and international NGOs in China. At the same time, the support received enabled agencies to provide specialised assistance to China.

Innovation and some old problems

There are many examples of good practice in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake – practices that could well be adopted by other countries facing similar disasters. One of these was the twinning of the most affected counties with other provinces and municipalities in China. This meant that these counties received large amounts of assistance directly from other provinces as local authorities competed with each other.

The downside to the twinning was that some counties were not twinned, and the assistance delivered by the twins (which themselves have very different financial capacities) varied a great deal (Zhang and Hu 2008). Even so, the impact of the initiative was that there were multiple channels of assistance for the affected counties, not just the central government one.

This model is particularly appropriate to the Chinese context, where provincial and municipal administrations still control extensive construction and other resources. But it is also more widely applicable, particularly in cases where local capacity has been damaged by the disaster. Essentially, it is a distributed approach to reconstruction, with the twins assisting their twinned counties to rebuild infrastructure, social structures and housing. This may be one of the factors contributing to the unique swiftness of the reconstruction.

One could easily see the same model being used in other disaster contexts where administrative units from different parts of the country are given responsibility for helping with reconstructions in smaller administrative units in the affected area. How much faster would reconstruction after Hurricane Katrina have been if different US states had been allocated responsibility for assisting specific wards in New Orleans? Clearly, such an innovative approach would require a change in the view that disasters are the problem of the area affected rather than a national problem.

“China proves that recovery need not always take five years or more, but can be much faster when the will is there.”



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There were examples of good practice on the donor side, particularly in the bringing in of lessons from elsewhere. The United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) for example, translated the ALNAP/Provention¹² paper on learning from 30 years of post-earthquake relief and recovery operations (Cosgrave 2008) into Chinese.

Interviewees cited three general types of poor donor practice:

- ▶ Time limits on contributions. This was particularly the case for donations by Canada, which had to be spent within 12 months of the quake. In sudden-onset natural disasters in general, and in the case of earthquakes in particular, the main concern is recovery. The acute humanitarian phase ends very quickly and the main problem is that of restoring shelter, infrastructure, services and livelihoods. Therefore, short time-frames for funding are particularly inappropriate.
- ▶ Vacillation by donors. Sweden came in for some criticism from interviewees who stated that they had been encouraged to believe that they would have Swedish funding initially, but that this later failed to materialise.
- ▶ Excessive rigidity by some donors. Interviewees cited instances of rigidity by some donors that made necessary changes in projects very difficult and time-consuming to agree. The Japanese Government was cited as being the most rigid. However, most interviewees regarded donors as very flexible and willing to accommodate quite large changes in projects.

Lessons learnt and recommendations for the future

The case of China offers lessons on the need for greater disaster response capacity in a changing world. It also highlights the advantages that a concerned government and rapid decision making can bring to the response and recovery.

1 Developing national capacity to cope with disasters is key, not only because national response can be more timely, but also because it can lead to a more disaster-aware culture nationally, which can in turn prompt more investment in risk reduction. This is happening now in China with the rebuilding of schools, sadly too late for the thousands of children who died at their desks.

2 The international humanitarian community needs to develop the capacity to provide information and expertise rather than funding in future similar situations. Interviewees acknowledged that they were not sufficiently prepared to bring learning from elsewhere as they did not have rosters of specialists who could advise on such topics as designing more child-friendly schools.

3 The international humanitarian community should try to harness more effectively the growing capacity in Asia, in order to deal with future disasters in the region. While the frequency of earthquakes is essentially constant, with some natural variation, the risks posed by earthquakes increase as populations grow in areas with significant seismic activity. The growth of mega-cities in earthquake zones means that an earthquake with a million fatalities is not inconceivable (Bilham, 2004).

4 The Chinese model of twinning affected zones with unaffected zones offers a model to speed recovery in large countries by multi-tracking assistance paths. While it had its flaws, the model helped to provide more and quicker assistance than would have been possible with all assistance channelled through the central government.

5 It is vital to take early decisions on recovery and to invest adequately in reconstruction so that people are returned to normality as quickly as possible. This will be aided by early and adequate pledges on recovery assistance. China proves that recovery need not always take five years or more, but can be much faster when the will is there.

About the Author

John Cosgrave

Independent Consultant

John Cosgrave is an independent consultant with more than 30 years of experience of humanitarian action and development in nearly 60 countries. He has worked as an independent consultant in the humanitarian sector since 1997, having spent most of his previous professional life managing NGO projects and programmes in complex emergencies or in the aftermath of natural disasters. His work for NGOs, governments and the UN is focused on humanitarian action, evaluation, training and operations. He combines broad experience with theoretical concepts to produce a coherent world-view of humanitarian action which he communicates through writing and training. Trained initially as a problem-solver (in civil, military, mechanical and agricultural engineering), and later as a manager and social scientist, he holds two Master's degrees, and is currently studying for his third. His current interest is in social research methods and epistemology.

Notes

- 1 Information based on field interviews with key humanitarian agencies in China from 25 March 2009 to 2 May 2009, and 67 questionnaires on donor performance (including 59 of OECD–DAC donors).

The HRI team, composed of John Cosgrave, Daniela Mamone and Philip Tamminga, expresses its gratitude to all those interviewed in China. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DARA.
- 2 This is local time – it was 06:28 GMT, as China uses a single time zone of GMT+8.
- 3 In China the earthquake is referred to as the Wenchuan earthquake. It is sometimes also referred to as the Great Sichuan Earthquake.
- 4 While the official figure was 242,419 killed and 164,581 injured (Spence, 2007, p149), there were also estimates of as many as 655,000 fatalities for this earthquake (Blanshan and Quarantelli, 1979, p1).
- 5 Cyclone Nargis happened nine days before the Sichuan earthquake.
- 6 There were 620 million mobile phones in China in September 2008 and the number is growing by six million per month (Gowing 2009, p68).
- 7 This can be contrasted with total international funding of US\$13.5 billion for the tsunami response and reconstruction (Cosgrave 2007, p18).
- 8 For example, the ‘Chinese Community at Harvard University’ donated approximately US\$78,000 via the Hong Kong Red Cross (Hong Kong Red Cross 2008).
- 9 This is often called the ‘recovery gap’.
- 10 Data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) financial tracking system (FTS) on 29 April 2009.
- 11 The Canadian Government regularly provides matching funds for humanitarian fundraising in Canada after major disasters. It provided matching funding for both Cyclone Nargis and the Sichuan earthquake.
- 12 The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) (www.alnap.org) is a grouping of evaluators from donors, UN agencies, NGOs, and independents that promotes evaluation and other lessons learning strategies in humanitarian action. The Provention Consortium (www.proventionconsortium.org) is a global coalition of international organisations, governments, the private sector, civil society organisations and academic institutions dedicated to increasing the safety of vulnerable communities and to reducing the impacts of disasters in developing countries.

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