

Sustainability in humanitarian action

Basis of a panel discussion:

“Sustainable Humanitarian Action: Bridging relief to development”

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Aid effectiveness and sustainable development has been on the international community’s agenda for years, going back to the ground-breaking Brundtland report, *Our Common Future*.¹ Since then, the debate has progressed considerably, but one issue that is consistently missing from our collective analysis and action is the link between humanitarian crises – disaster, conflicts and emergencies – and how this impacts on development efforts. With a significant proportion of OECD/DAC government ODA spending dedicated to responding the needs of hundreds of millions of people affected each year by humanitarian crises (on average, about 10% of ODA), it’s about time for a serious reflection on how humanitarian issues can be better understood and integrated into development efforts – and vice versa.

At first glance, humanitarian actions have little to do with sustainability. After all, humanitarian actions are – at least in theory – short term interventions focused on the saving lives and alleviating human suffering in situations of extreme stress and crisis, when the capacity of local actors is overwhelmed. The focus is on the crisis event and the needs of people directly affected by the crisis. From humanitarian actors’ perspective, it is critically important that aid follows well-established principles: that it is based on the needs of the affected population, delivered rapidly (often through international actors), is impartial, and completely independent from achieving political or other objectives.

In contrast, from the development side, efforts are largely long-term programmes that work to address poverty, promote economic growth, and address social inequities. The focus is often on achieving long term changes by addressing underlying structural issues and building capacity of local and national institutions at the country level. From development actors’ perspectives, aid delivery is most often channelled through local actors, and often has a political dimension as it requires working through and with different stakeholders, each with different agendas and vested interests in the outcomes of development efforts.

Unfortunately, for too many years there has been a philosophical and programmatic divide between the two camps. But experience has shown that these divisions are not only simplistic, but short-sighted. The devastation caused to Central American countries by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, for example, destroyed in a matter of hours the results of decades of national and international development investments. Besides the enormous loss of lives and massive destruction of infrastructure, the hurricane pushed millions of already poor and vulnerable people into situations of extreme risk, overwhelming existing coping mechanisms and undermining their capacity for recovery.

This example alone is a good argument for development planners to reconsider how to ensure the design of development programmes include elements to anticipate, prepare for and

¹ Brundtland, Gro Harlem. *Our Common Future* (1987), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

minimise the stresses that a humanitarian crisis like a natural disaster can provoke. However, as the massive devastation caused by the 2010 earthquake in Haiti shows, many of these lessons have still not been learned by the international community. Chronic poverty, weak state institutions and poor development planning and a lack of investment in strengthening preparedness and response capacity for future crises all combined to accentuate the loss of lives and impact. This is all the more tragic, as four back-to-back hurricanes in Haiti the year before underscored the urgent need for long-term capacity-building strategies.² The challenge now is to ensure that all these different issues are integrated into the post-earthquake recovery plans, so that Haiti can indeed “build back better”.

In a similar fashion, the international community’s response to long-standing chronic humanitarian crises, such as Sudan, Somalia, or Colombia, shows that humanitarian crises are more and more not just isolated, short term events, with quick interventions and easy exit strategies. In some contexts, humanitarian organisations have been operating for decades providing food, water, basic health services and temporary shelter. This is clearly not an adequate solution for addressing the medium and long-term needs and priorities of affected populations, particularly the millions of people displaced by crises. Inevitable questions arise on how to best provide more developmental types of programmes and services, such as school education and livelihoods support, and prepare the way for a gradual transition to, hopefully, stability and development.

In the humanitarian sector, and to a lesser extent, the development community, this reality has led to some significant progress in terms of conceptualising humanitarian assistance from a broader perspective. For some years now, humanitarian actors have argued for the need to integrate prevention, preparedness and disaster risk reduction (DRR) into the responses, and linking relief to rehabilitation and development (LRRD). This has resulted in much more sophisticated programming, going well beyond the stereotypical image of humanitarian assistance as simply throwing food from the back of trucks to masses of desperate people – a view unfortunately still widely held by the public in many countries, and reinforced by the media (and by humanitarian organisations themselves sometimes). Instead, humanitarian actors have made slow but steady progress in rethinking approaches to emergency relief to include activities that promote early recovery, restore livelihoods and strengthen capacities of local communities.

The problem is that this paradigm shift has not necessarily translated into a corresponding shift in the politics of aid. Many of the world’s main donor governments, for example, signed up to the principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) – a set of guiding principles and good practices that they themselves developed in 2003 to address the question of how their humanitarian aid money could have greater impact for people affected by crises.³ In the GHD, donor government recognised the need to keep their aid neutral, impartial, and independent from other aims and objectives. They also committed to investing in prevention, risk reduction, LRRD and capacity building. But DARA’s Humanitarian Response Index (HRI), which tracks and

² See for example: <http://daraint.org/humanitarian-response-index/humanitarian-response-index-2009/response-to-crisis/haiti/#>

³ See <http://www.goodhumanitarianandonorship.org/gns/home.aspx> for more background on the GHD.

monitors donor governments humanitarian assistance shows that governments are consistently falling short in meeting these commitments.⁴

Over the past five years, the HRI initiative has interviewed thousands of representatives of UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement in different crises about the challenges they face in responding more effectively to humanitarian needs, and the role that donors could play in facilitating their work. The most common complaint heard is that donor government don't pay enough attention or provide funding and support for prevention, recovery or capacity building efforts. Too many donors still conceive humanitarian assistance in short-term "emergency" funding cycles with restrictions on activities which they see as more developmental, despite the evidence that the majority of crises don't fall into such neat categories.

This has two consequences for humanitarian organisations. First, it keeps them trapped in a short-term planning and funding cycles, which makes it hard to look for more cost-effective and sustainable approaches to addressing not only needs, but the factors that contribute to vulnerability. Second, it means that many activities that could potentially support a gradual transition to recovery are often unfunded due to the bureaucratic divide, trapped between humanitarian funding and development funding, but not eligible for either. A clear example of this is funding for disaster risk reduction. According to recent reports, only 1% of ODA and humanitarian assistance is dedicated to prevention and preparedness activities.⁵

For many humanitarian organisations, particularly NGOs, this means either abandoning programmes for lack of funding or trying to sustain them with their own resources. For others it means "disguising" activities to better fit bureaucratic definitions and procedures in order to maintain funding. This means, for example, that in many crisis situations humanitarian interventions are being used as stopgap measures for addressing more complicated development problems.

Government donor officials responsible for humanitarian assistance interviewed for the HRI express their own frustrations at trying to fulfil humanitarian objectives and ensure that their partners can secure longer-term funding and support to meet longer term needs. Many complain of a lack institutional support to bridge humanitarian and development funding, and a lack of understanding from their development colleagues on the unique dynamics of humanitarian crises, where the perception of impartiality is critical for the success of interventions. They also express legitimate concerns about the increasing expectations that humanitarian departments will assume responsibilities for more and more "developmental" activities like DRR and recovery, without the corresponding increase in budget and staffing, all the while still trying to ensure aid meets immediate needs in the emergency phase of a crisis.

But it's not just a question of bureaucratic procedures and divisions between humanitarian and development departments. The humanitarian imperative to act in the face of desperate

⁴ See <http://daraint.org/humanitarian-response-index/humanitarian-response-index-2011/> for more information on the Humanitarian Response Index initiative.

⁵ See the Global Humanitarian Assistance reports on humanitarian financing at <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org>

human suffering, particularly the responsibility to protect civilians from harm, often comes into conflict with other agendas. Political influences at the governmental level can undermine a more principled approach to humanitarian assistance and better integration with development assistance. The HRI 2010 report findings showed that in 10 of the 14 humanitarian crises assessed there was evidence that humanitarian crises and aid in response to the crises was politicised, damaging the effectiveness of aid efforts.⁶

Far too often, aid is used as an instrument to advance foreign policy, military or economic interests, build goodwill and political relations between donor and recipient countries, or to meet with domestic pressures, such as media interest. All this contributes to making it harder to ensure that aid, whether humanitarian or development, follow principle of effectiveness, accountability or sustainability for the world's most vulnerable people.

This politicisation includes the increasing militarisation of aid delivery and the demonstrated negative consequences in terms of access, protection and safety of civilians and humanitarian workers. In some cases, governments have prioritised state-building and post-conflict development exercises at the expense of recognising and funding critical humanitarian needs, as we have seen in Afghanistan, and more recently, with creation of the new state of South Sudan, which has diverted attention away from the grave humanitarian situation in Darfur and South Kordofan.⁷

In other cases, like Somalia or the occupied Palestinian Territories, anti-terrorism agendas have meant humanitarian organisations are faced with unacceptable restrictions and conditions that severely restrict their ability to access populations affected by crisis, or provide aid without discrimination, based on needs. This clearly goes against the GHD principles, and is morally unacceptable. From a more practical perspective, selectively choosing how humanitarian is delivered and to whom can often backfire on donor governments and can in fact entrench resentments against donor governments by the local population. Such approaches often inadvertently reinforce the power and position of groups working against them, and undermine the confidence of the local population in other longer-term development programmes.

Other examples include Colombia, Sri Lanka or Ethiopia, where donor governments have often uncritically funded and supported the host governments' agendas even when the state is wholly or partly responsible for humanitarian crises there. Host governments also play the aid game, using the tenants of the Paris Declaration to try to limit access to and scrutiny of humanitarian crises within their borders, or control the use aid resources, leading to aid being distributed according to political interests, rather than through neutral, impartial and independent channels, based on needs.

New evidence from DARA's Climate Vulnerability Monitor (CVM) underlines the need to get past the sterile bureaucratic debates and the political manipulation of aid, and focus on finding

⁶ DARA. *The Humanitarian Response Index 2011: The Problems of Politicisation* (2011), Madrid: DARA.

⁷ <http://daraint.org/2011/07/12/2064/july-2011-the-republic-of-south-sudan-turns-a-new-page-%E2%80%93-but-humanitarian-needs-persist/>

sustainable solutions to addressing chronic vulnerability.⁸ According to the CVM, there are an estimated 350,000 deaths each year from climate related issues, and an estimated 5 million people will die in the next decade due to climate change. Many millions more will suffer from illnesses, disabilities, displacement and loss of livelihood.

This is a cross-cutting issue that affects both humanitarian and development assistance, and has a serious implications on the sustainability and effectiveness of aid efforts. From the humanitarian side, all projections show that the scale and scope of humanitarian interventions will exponentially increase in the coming decade, due in part to the consequences of climate change. Unless measures are taken now to dramatically reduce climate-related vulnerability and increase our capacity to anticipate, prepare for and respond to these crises. Given that humanitarian system is already stretched to the limit to respond to current humanitarian needs – recall the two recent mega-disasters of Haiti and Pakistan – this becomes an urgent priority.

The effects are not just in terms of natural disasters, flooding, extreme weather events, and habitat loss. The health dimension of climate change is often overlooked or ignored. According to CVM data, almost 99% of climate related mortality will be due to health impacts. By 2030, the estimates are for some 835 million deaths due to climate-related health issues, most of them children under 5, and most in sub-Saharan Africa. Most of this impact is from preventable health issues like malnutrition and infectious diseases, and concentrated in a few countries.

One of the most striking conclusions from the CVM is that most climate related impacts will be in least-developed countries. In other words, poverty is a determining factor in explaining who will pay the human price for climate change. But these are precisely the countries where the international community is already invested billions of dollars in humanitarian assistance, development aid, and in many cases, peace-keeping operations. This is yet again an argument for a more holistic and integrated approach to the problem of sustainability.

The humanitarian consequences of climate change seems to have been completely overlooked or ignored in most of the climate change debate and certainly from much of the funding available for climate adaptation. Neither has it been adequately picked up in operational terms from humanitarian or development actors. But there are dozens of simple, cost-effective health interventions, like bed nets, child vaccination and nutrition and agricultural and livestock programmes, which could reap triple benefits from the humanitarian, development and climate change perspectives.

The famine in the Horn of Africa is the most recent manifestation of what the future may entail. The international community is now mobilising to respond to what is one of the most serious humanitarian emergencies in decades. Yet, the signs that a crisis was imminent were readily available to decision-makers well before the famine reached television screens, making

⁸ DARA. The Climate Vulnerability Monitor: The State of the Climate Crisis. (2011) Madrid: DARA.

this a preventable crisis – at the very least, the impact could have been minimised through better preparedness and preparation strategies.⁹

At best, current efforts are stop gap measures, but the solutions to the famine are largely development solutions, actions aimed at increasing the resilience of communities and risk reduction strategies that will help reduce the impact of future threats before they progress to the stage of a famine. At the end of the day, neither humanitarian or development interventions will have any sustainable impact on the Horn of Africa unless they are coupled with an awareness of the climate dimension of the problem, and a more nuanced understanding of the politics underpinning humanitarian, development and climate change issues at the local, country and international level.

Perhaps the place to start is by reframing aid efforts on the concept of building resilience of local communities – giving them the capacity to cope more effectively with the challenges they face due to poverty, disasters, conflicts and climate change. This is one of the main conclusions of a recent review of the UK’s emergency relief efforts, one that the government has endorsed wholeheartedly.¹⁰ Resilience provides a new framework to assess aid effectiveness and sustainability, and may offer a fresh perspective on dismantling the artificial divide between humanitarian and development aid. By asking how any intervention contributes to reducing vulnerability and strengthening capacities of the people most like to be suffering the effects of poverty, humanitarian crises or climate change, donor governments can shift the focus back to where it should be: the needs of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable.

The shift in programming focus also needs to be accompanied by changes at the institutional level. The same review of the UK’s emergency response also highlighted that international aid agencies, DFID included, need to scale-up their organisational capacity to anticipate future crises and be more forward-looking and innovative at finding solutions before problems get out of hand. An anticipatory approach to identifying future trends and their likely humanitarian consequences, linked to understanding of what this requires in terms of building resilience, may be a more productive and effective means of finding solutions to the challenges we face.

Our fundamental challenge, indeed, our collective responsibility, is to get beyond the debates, and ensure that **all** aid efforts, whether under the rubric of development or humanitarian assistance or climate adaption measures, are driven by an unwavering focus on meeting the needs of the world’s most vulnerable, wherever they are, and whatever the causes of that vulnerability.

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⁹ See <http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/08/letters-our-readers-0> for more analysis on the crisis.

¹⁰ See <http://daraint.org/2011/06/15/1782/the-uk-commits-to-humanitarian-principles-and-recommendations-of-the-humanitarian-emergency-response-review/> and <http://daraint.org/2011/06/16/1784/a-word-from-the-director-june-2011-2/> for more information on the UK’s Humanitarian Emergency Response Review (HERR)