

Redefining the official humanitarian aid agenda

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Every year, approximately \$6 billion is spent by OECD countries on emergency relief. This money is a vital support to some of the poorest people in the world – but the way it is spent is changing and there are growing concerns about politicisation of official humanitarian aid (OHG). ODI research¹ has tracked those changes. We propose a new ‘deal’ and a new set of principles to protect the essential purpose of humanitarian aid.

Humanitarian aid needs to be impartial and neutral (see Box). Humanitarian donors need to be accountable. But while there has been much talk of an ‘accountability revolution’ in the sphere of international humanitarian action over the last decade, the behaviour of official donors in the humanitarian arena has attracted little scrutiny.

As it happens, donors have become much more involved in humanitarian decision-making and operations. They have become much less willing to delegate full responsibility to UN, Red Cross and NGOs actors for defining need and planning responses. This phenomenon of ‘bilateralisation’ of humanitarian response includes a number of elements:

- An apparent shift away from supporting multilateral institutions
- Increased earmarking of contributions
- An increasing role for donors in the coordination of humanitarian action
- Tougher contractual and managerial regimes to manage donor-agency partnerships
- Increased donor presence at field level.
- Increased use of non-conventional humanitarian organisations to deliver assistance, including the military and private contractors.

These changes reflect donors’ legitimate demands to enhance the performance and accountability of their operational partners. But these moves have also coincided with a period when many donor governments have been developing much more interventionist approaches to the management of conflict, and seeking ways of linking their

Humanitarian principles

Humanity is the core principle of humanitarian action: people have a right to receive assistance and to offer it. This is a fundamental human principle which should be enjoyed by all citizens of all countries.

Impartiality is a reflection of humanity. Humanitarian assistance is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients, and without adverse distinction of any kind. Decisions regarding the allocation of assistance should be made proportionate to need and not according to any other factor.

Neutrality means not taking sides in hostilities or engaging at any time in controversies of a religious, political, racial or ideological nature. It is through adherence to this principle that agencies can gain access to affected populations.

Independence means that agencies endeavour not to act as instruments of foreign policy.

assistance programmes with a wider effort to enhance international peace and security. Humanitarian principles may be at risk.

Some commentators have begun to question donor motives. Is this simply, as most donors argue, a means of enhancing the effectiveness of humanitarian action? Or does it mark a gradual encroachment on the political independence of humanitarian action, with operational agencies becoming little more than the executing wings of donor governments?

Research by the Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI concludes that while donors have a legitimate and important role to play in managing international humanitarian assistance, there are important problems in the way that they are currently doing so.

First, the trend towards bilateral decision-making militates against ensuring that humanitarian aid resources are distributed in proportion to need. Current allocations of humanitarian aid tend not to be allocated impartially, but

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rather to be highly concentrated on the visible emergencies in which Western donors are playing a prominent military and political role. So, for example, between 1996 and 1999, the top five recipients of bilateral humanitarian aid were all political hotspots: Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, the former Yugoslavia (unspecified), Iraq and Israel, which together accounted for £2,725 million. The next five, Rwanda, Sudan, Afghanistan, Angola and Indonesia – received \$1,388 million combined. These allocations cannot be explained in terms of the relative need of the populations.

Second, the way in which humanitarian aid spending is reported remains very opaque, and it is extremely difficult to track where funds are being disbursed, and the different channels for disbursement (UN, NGO etc). It is also very difficult to measure quickly and accurately the precise size of the emergency aid pot, since many donors continue to report spending on refugees living in their own countries as part of their official development assistance. More generally, the mechanisms by which donors are held to account through international mechanisms, such as the Development Assistance Committee, and through other mechanisms such as parliamentary review, evaluation and results-based management systems remain very weak.

Third, the new management frameworks that donors have introduced to manage their relationships with their operational partners do not necessarily contribute to enhanced performance, but may serve to diminish the independence of humanitarian action. In particular, as donors take an increasing role in defining who needs what, how need should be met, and what outputs should be measured, so it will be important to analyse the factors driving donors' analysis and ensuring that space is preserved for independent analysis and response.

Overarching these concerns is the fact that donors and agencies alike often lack a clear statement of the purpose of their humanitarian aid programmes. The objectives of humanitarian assistance have continued to broaden over the past decade. While saving lives remains at the core of the humanitarian agenda, in recent years there has been a steady effort to incorporate developmental and conflict reduction objectives into humanitarian policy. While these objectives can be complementary, they also often conflict.

Thus, as donors assert their role more strongly, it will be important to ensure that the purpose of this engagement is clear; to understand its operational implications; and to identify how donors and their operational partners can reach consensus on what constitutes good practice in official humanitarian donorship. HPG has therefore identified three principles which might govern official

humanitarian donorship:

- Active respect for international humanitarian law and principles
- Commitment to needs-based approaches to resource allocation
- Ensure adequate, flexible and predictable funding

There are important and real opportunities for realising this agenda. In particular, in parallel with its work on 'bilateralisation', HPG has been undertaking a study commissioned by an international group of donors and agencies called the Humanitarian Financing Work Programme.² As part of this initiative, HPG has led an international team that has sought to investigate the process by which needs are defined and measured, and the role of needs assessment in informing donor decisions regarding resource allocations.

The findings of the study coincide with that in the bilateralisation study, in that both highlight the fact that donor behaviour cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, what needs to be understood are the relationships between donors and their operational partners. Specifically, the study finds that agencies themselves often fail to undertake robust assessment of needs, but tend instead to tailor their assessments to the process of raising funds for their programmes. There need to be more consistent approaches to the definition of need, in terms of key indicators of health, well-being and security, and these need to serve as more systematic triggers for response by donors and operational agencies alike. More broadly, HPG's work suggests that these agencies need to develop a more critical and open relationship with their donors, not simply to comply passively with what they think donors want. In other words, to build a relationship based on trust and genuine partnership.

The agenda is both modest and significant. It is modest in that it is concerned with a relatively tiny proportion of global wealth, which is seeking to counter the effects of much more powerful military, political and economic interests in disaster-affected countries. It is significant in that defining the purpose of such funds, the way in which they are managed, and the basis on which they are allocated says much about the relationship between the most powerful nations and some of the most marginalised people on the planet.

1. J. Macrae et al (2002) 'Uncertain Power: the changing role of official donors in humanitarian action' HPG Report 12, Overseas Development Institute, London.
2. James Darcy, C Hofmann (2003) 'According to Need?: needs assessment and decision-making in the humanitarian sector', HPG Report 14, Overseas Development Institute, London.

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