

Humanitarian Exchange

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About HPN

The Humanitarian Practice Network at the Overseas Development Institute is an independent forum where field workers, managers and policymakers in the humanitarian sector share information, analysis and experience



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Editorial

With the huge expansion of NGOs and other actors working in the humanitarian sector in the past decade have come numerous initiatives aimed at making them more professional, more responsible for their power and more accountable for what they do. This has often been referred to as an 'accountability revolution'.

The responsibility, and therefore accountability, for responding to humanitarian crisis rests primarily, not with operational humanitarian organisations, but with the government or prevailing authority of the country in crisis, and with the states of the international community. It also rests at an individual level: we are all responsible and accountable for how we choose to respond to egregious suffering. This is where the humanitarian imperative originates.

The special feature of this issue of *Humanitarian Exchange* looks at where the 'accountability revolution' has brought us. Our contributors ask who is (or should be) accountable; to whom they are (or should be) accountable; and what they are (or should be) accountable for. John Mitchell reviews three broad approaches to accountability in humanitarian response, in particular concerning the accountability of operational organisations. Maurice Herson explores the particular nature of *humanitarian* accountability in the light of efforts to improve accountability to the 'beneficiaries' or 'claimants'. While there have been numerous efforts to strengthen NGO accountability, there has



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been little attention on how effectively donors are held to account for their policies and the impact of their aid. Joanna Macrae and Adele Harmer look at a new initiative that aims to improve donor accountability. The responsibility of states for recognising and responding to humanitarian crisis, and the means for holding them to account, are examined by Caroline Ford. Taking the case of the sexual exploitation of refugees in West Africa, Asmita Naik draws lessons about accountability in practice in the humanitarian aid world. Finally, Austen Davis questions whether the system-wide accountability structures and mechanisms that many believe are needed would be beneficial, or even possible.

As always, we also have articles on a range of other policy and practice issues. In this issue, there are articles on facing the challenges of post-conflict transition for essential public services, health systems, national budgets and income generation. The applications of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for humanitarian operations are explained. Our series on government policy continues with a review of the British government's humanitarian aid. To end, François Grünwald considers the implications of the war on Iraq for humanitarian action.

Accountability: the three-lane highway

It seems that everyone involved in humanitarian action is in favour of improved accountability. John Mitchell reflects on the actions of the three main players in humanitarian action: states, donors and implementing agencies

States and political actors, donors, the UN, humanitarian agencies and the media all uphold the principle of being held to account for one's actions towards others. Everyone agrees that being held to account will enhance the responsibility of individuals, organisations and states and, in turn, improve the quality of humanitarian action. As this 'accountability culture' has developed, so the number of duty bearers and duty-holders has increased, and the varieties of accountability have proliferated. We now talk of 'upwards accountability', 'downwards accountability', 'horizontal accountability', 'forwards accountability', 'backwards accountability', 'responsible accountability'; the list goes on.

Three areas of accountability

The means by which humanitarian agencies have chosen to improve accountability have been dependent on organisational mandates, identity and *raison d'être*. This has given rise to a rich, but sometimes confusing, array of initiatives and approaches. These approaches can be rationalised into three main areas, or 'lanes' on the accountability highway. The first concerns the rights and needs of the 'beneficiaries' or 'claimants' of humanitarian assistance. The emphasis here is on participative methodologies, contextual programming and approaches for listening to and responding directly to the needs of people affected by crisis. The second area emphasises humanitarian principles, codes of conduct, legal instruments and bodies of ethics and philosophy; and the third technical standards, performance indicators, impact indicators and results-based approaches. Broadly speaking, this typology represents a three-lane highway leading to the ultimate destination of improved accountability in the humanitarian sector. These lanes are not exclusive; some approaches may overlap, and the portfolio of approaches adopted will include elements from all three lanes.

Given that this expanding accountability culture has produced such heavy traffic on the three lane accountability highway, many humanitarians are beginning to ask whether it is bringing about the changes we all hoped it would. Are we collectively more accountable? Is the practice and impact of humanitarian action any better as a result?

States

Accountability in humanitarian action is related to power. At the 'highest' level sit states and political actors. The optimistic view is that the modern social contract between citizen and state invests sovereignty in the people, rather

than in the government. States are charged with being accountable to their citizens on the basis of international law and human rights. On an intra-state level, this opens the door to international or regional interventions in response to perceived violations of human rights.

That's the theory. In practice, history suggests that inaction in the face of genocide is the rule rather than the exception; one need look no further than the Rwandan genocide for evidence of this. Where is the mechanism for making political leaders accountable for *inaction* – especially since the motivating force seems to be to *avoid* getting involved? Where states do intervene, as in Kosovo and Iraq, the humanitarian or human rights argument is little more than a flimsy disguise for wider strategic and geopolitical interests. Fundamental questions remain unanswered. Where does the responsibility for circumscribing the actions of states lie? Who is responsible for ending a war and creating a durable peace? To whom are states ultimately accountable for these actions? The only position left is to force 'accountability by proxy' by controlling the actions of states and political actors by other mechanisms within civil society, such as peaceful protest, lobbying and media pressure. Many would feel that this is inadequate.

Donors

Accountability within the humanitarian sector was initially promoted by a general donor concern about the impact and cost-effectiveness of aid. Donors were concerned to be accountable to the public for the responsible disbursement of funds. Most of the methods for achieving this were chosen from lane three on the accountability highway: the focus was on finding more objective criteria for choosing which agencies to fund, and for demonstrating the impact of monies spent. This view is still very much with us. Andrew Natsios, head of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), told an audience of NGO representatives: 'Doing good is no longer enough. We have to show results. If you cannot measure aid empirically, then USAID will have to find other partners to fund'. One effect is to push the responsibility away from the donor and onto the contracting agency. This has resulted in pressure on agencies to adopt the approaches in lane three, when a more natural ideological stance may have been to focus on the participative methods from lane one.

Having said this, donors are beginning to look much harder at themselves. A significant reason for this is the 'coherence agenda', which has brought to light the fact

that humanitarian aid is an instrument of foreign policy; security is now inextricably linked with environmental and health issues, refugee flows, asylum and other humanitarian-related issues. Institutionally, the aid agenda is entwined with the work of other government departments, so that the traditional separation of aid and politics has diminished. Questions have emerged around donor conditionality, the over-funding of certain programmes and the under-funding of others, uncoordinated funding, declining global aid flows, inequitable flows not based on need and the perceived loss of neutrality and impartiality for humanitarian agencies working in the field.

Has this made donors any more accountable? It seems not. Making aid responses consistent with foreign and defence policies has obscured accountability for strictly humanitarian assistance. Managerial accountability has been framed in terms of ‘results based management’, but this has been affected by a lack of meaningful measures for humanitarian performance; financial accountability is weak since it is very difficult to track flows of aid funding.

Perhaps the overarching problem here is to do with a lack of clarity around the aims and objectives of humanitarian action. So long as humanitarian assistance is linked to military and political strategies, it will be ‘donated’ not only on the basis of humanitarian need and humanitarian principles, but also on the basis of wider political objectives.

Agencies

Agencies have tended to pick and mix activities in each of the three ‘lanes’ in order to reach their accountability destination.

Lane 1: Participation and the ‘beneficiary’

Traffic in the participation lane has been with us since the 1980s; consultation and participation of affected populations has always been thought of as empowering and appropriate, and therefore more effective. Developmentalists have championed this notion vigorously. However, these concepts have not made a smooth transition into the humanitarian sector, where they have been extremely difficult to apply.

Perhaps the most ambitious ideas in this field were taken up in 2001 by the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP), which aimed to test the viability of developing a range of field-based accountability mechanisms for claimants. Findings from three field trials have revealed an array of structural constraints that have rendered this particular idea not feasible in practice. There are now plans to set up a ‘professional association’ – to be called Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAPI) – which will aim to hold agencies to account on the basis of ‘accountability standards’. Whatever this new organisation will achieve, it seems the ideal of a direct connection with the claimant is now lost.

Lane 2: Principles and law

The traffic in lane 2 guides the conduct of humanitarian actors and functions as a basis for reflection and holding

Some major accountability bodies



people to account for their actions. As such, these principles, codes of conduct and bodies of law are both necessary and important. However, the road has been rocky. Anecdotal evidence from evaluations of humanitarian action suggests that, despite great efforts at promotion and dissemination over the past decade, a significant proportion of field workers are still not aware of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Code of Conduct. Critics argue that, as signing up to the code of conduct is voluntary, its potential impact will always be diluted.

Many feel that the Red Cross Fundamental Principles, in particular the principles of neutrality and impartiality, are in danger of being compromised, diluted and co-opted. Indeed, events in Chechnya and Afghanistan, for example, where aid workers have been murdered by belligerent groups, underline the fact that the once-sacrosanct symbol of the Red Cross has become a specific target. The scaffolding around traditional notions of legitimate authority and respect has been all but dismantled. The seemingly ‘unlawful’ intervention by ‘coalition forces’ in Iraq earlier this year has prompted some to argue that international humanitarian law (IHL) and the UN system are in terminal decline. This may be an overstatement, but it is clear that the authority of IHL and the UN Security Council has been undermined.

Lane 3: Results

Lane 3 represents the application of business management techniques to the humanitarian sector. These include results-based management, technical standards such as the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Relief, quality standards such as ISO 9000, quality frameworks such as the EFQM Excellence Model and performance frameworks. The root of all this appears to stem from a lack of trust. Donors and the media have brought into focus the shortcomings of humanitarian agencies and the practice of audit has been imported from the financial sector to allow for increased scrutiny. In turn, indicators have been promoted as a way of measuring performance. Old-fashioned systems of accountability based on trust are seen to be outmoded and inconsistent with the exacting demands of the modern world.

Has this approach worked? An increasing number of people outside of the donor community appear to believe that the aims of humanitarian action are not reducible to meeting set targets and following prescribed procedures enshrined in quality frameworks and impact indicators. Indeed, the search for precise indicators has proved to be something of a lost cause; simple quantifiable targets have been unable to adequately express the desired outcome of humanitarian action. Some believe that these techniques are liable to become co-opted, for example as an excuse not to fund one agency over another, or to commit funding in one country but not another. Blind adherence to these quantifiable indicators and targets is also seen as undermining professional judgement in difficult situations, for example where aid may need to be withdrawn for moral reasons. This question has, wrongly, been caricatured as a francophone (against)/ anglophone (for) debate. It remains to be seen whether a results-

based approach is conducive to measuring the goals of humanitarian action, but the debate is likely to remain colourful.

Where is the highway going?

Although we are some way from reaching our collective destination, there have been improvements and successes. ALNAP, itself a child of the accountability revolution, is producing the most comprehensive and independent assessment of the performance of the humanitarian sector using the findings from an impressive sample of evaluative reports. It is finding that humanitarianism is working well; human lives are being saved by effective and professionally-managed food, health and water and sanitation interventions. There are also improvements in evaluations themselves, and an expanding awareness of key issues. It is true that humanitarian aid has its limits – it is not creating peace or rebuilding livelihoods – but it is increasingly effective at meeting its most basic aim of saving human life. And long may that continue.

John Mitchell is the ALNAP Coordinator.

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Putting the ‘H’ back into humanitarian accountability

The Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP) has made significant progress in defining accountability. In so doing, argues Maurice Herson, it risks losing sight of the particular nature of accountability in humanitarian situations

A recent search on Google.com for ‘accountability’ brought up nearly three million results covering an enormous range of areas in which accountability is now sought, investigated, formulated or mandated. They cover most aspects of public – and some private – life. The Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP) appeared as number 109 on that list. The origins of the HAP lie in the search to find a method of redress for the beneficiaries, or potential beneficiaries, of humanitarian assistance (now grouped together as claimants).¹ Three field trials have been carried out to test various approaches to field-level accountability: in Sierra Leone in December 2001–May 2002; in Afghanistan in May–July 2002; and in Cambodia in August 2002–February 2003.

The HAP defines accountability as follows:

Accountability involves two principles and mechanisms: (i) those by which individuals, organisations and States account for their actions and are held responsible for them, and (ii) those by which they may

¹ Termed ‘downwards accountability’. This appears to put claimants lower down a hierarchy of those to whom humanitarian actors should be accountable, while at the same time presenting this accountability as in some ways of greater concern than accountability to donors. This article proposes dispensing with this hierarchy and instead talking of ‘forwards accountability’ to claimants, and ‘backwards accountability’ to donors.

safely and legitimately report concerns, complaints and get redress where appropriate. Humanitarian accountability is concerned with ethics, rights and responsibilities ... and agreed standards and benchmarks. Men, women and children affected by disasters have a right to assistance and protection. They also have a right to information, to participation, to be heard, and to redress.

The HAP thus talks about accountability in ways that are hard to differentiate from the other contexts in which the term is widely used. Although there is a great deal of dispute about the nature, applicability and status of principles of humanitarian practice in the world today, the core concepts of independence, neutrality and impartiality at least lie at the heart of all of these disputes, alongside the right to life with dignity. This article argues that they should remain within the concept of humanitarian accountability, although they can be at variance with some aspects of the more general concept of accountability to claimants. We must hold to this right and these principles, even if others, including at times claimants themselves, might not give them priority.

The case for accountability

In general terms, humanitarian action aims to provide assistance and protection in an appropriate and timely way to those affected by disasters and crises. This idea of appropriateness translates into accountability to:

- beneficiaries/claimants;
- standards – aiming to specify good practice in humanitarian action, and in the specific case of the Sphere Project serving to quantify the rights of claimants; and
- principles – serving to guide the behaviour of humanitarian agencies, ultimately to the benefit of claimants.

The case put forward here is based on the idea that any organisation that wishes to meet humanitarian needs has a set of accountabilities. The ones that are of interest here are to:

- claimants;
- principles; and
- institutional mandates.²

These may themselves refer to other externally validated mandates or instruments. This is the case for many organisations that claim a rights-based approach to their work, or subscribe to the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct or to the Sphere standards.

There is both a moral case for humanitarian actors being accountable to claimants, and a practical case, that being accountable to claimants results in better programme outcomes. The moral case, which is not hard to argue, rests on the idea expressed by the word ‘claimant’ itself: that those in need have rights to protection and assistance. Thus, those who deliver assistance or assure protection are

doing so out of a reciprocal duty. As the HAP trial in Cambodia stated:

- humanitarian claimants have a legitimate claim to assistance;
- humanitarian actors assume responsibility to protect and uphold that claim; and
- with responsibility comes an obligation to accountability.

The practical case, while intuitive, is not supported by a great mass of empirical evidence, although the Ombudsman Project and the HAP arose out of a desire to meet certain deficiencies or problems in the delivery of assistance.

The case for being accountable to principles of humanitarian action is similarly two-sided. Here, the two parts are the moral case for acting according to certain principles, and the practical case for the better outcome from so acting. There is a great deal of argument around these two complementary cases. Do the principles serve only to position agencies on the correct bit of high ground and assure their ability to, for example, negotiate with armed factions or state duty-bearers? Or do they also enable better outcomes for the recipients of aid and further their protection? Whatever the position one takes in these arguments, to act without regard to these principles is not acceptable. They are at the core of humanitarian action.

The bulk of the empirical evidence for the link between accountability and good practice comes from government and administration in democratic societies, which are a long way from the sociological description of what is happening in most situations where there is humanitarian need. We should thus be wary of transferring the conclusions of this evidence. Besides, the representative nature of such democracies is in this context at odds with the fact that humanitarian agencies are distinctively self-mandated – with the arguable exception of the UN agencies – and therefore cannot claim to have delegated legitimacy. This makes it all the more important to operate according to externally validated principles.

What does accountability to claimants actually entail?

The HAP trials have been based on the ideas of exclusion (to be avoided), inclusion (to be assured), proper or appropriate action (to be monitored) and consultation. The first three are about the quality of the assistance programme – no-one in need should be left out, and so on. It could be argued that, if they are to be successfully implemented, these ideas require commitment in practice to impartiality, neutrality and independence. The last, consultation, is often seen as both a tool and a method to support and aid the achievement of the others, and also a thing worth doing in itself; to return to the HAP definition above, it is the methodology that applies the ‘right to information, to participation, to be heard’ (and maybe also to ‘redress’).

² This list does not include accountability to donors, and accountability to other contractual arrangements around any particular action or set of activities.



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*Accountability to claimants in Sri Lanka:
water first, then education*

There are those who support the position that humanitarian assistance should aim to deliver, as well as is possible, relief from suffering; anything else is a bonus but not integral to the project. Others would argue for including other motives and objectives – for transformation through humanitarian action. A spectrum of positions between the two exists, of course. For the former, consultation is an instrument for assuring better results, while for the latter, it is perhaps as important as the material assistance itself, although to seek to increase people's capacity to run their own lives at the potential expense of those lives arguably makes little sense. If humanitarian action is conceived of as primarily about mitigating the effects of disasters, then the value of participation and consultation with beneficiaries is no greater than the value of the principles of neutrality and impartiality – they both serve the prime objective of improving overall programme performance. Therefore, humanitarian accountability requires the application of these principles, as well as interactions with claimants. If humanitarian action is conceived of as also, or equally, or even primarily, about the transformation and empowerment of those affected, then these fundamental humanitarian principles have no place in an accountability theory or practice, and accountability has no different meaning in humanitarian practice than it does in any other sphere.

Accountability in the real world

An experience that was formative of my views about this subject occurred while I was working with newly displaced people in Sri Lanka. My initial assessment of course

entailed talking extensively with a range of them. Again and again, above all else, the adults wanted to be able to assure an education for their children. They could envisage making temporary shelters to live in and they hoped for food assistance, but they could not see how they would be able to provide books, paper, pencils, teaching, classrooms and continuity leading towards qualifications; education was a major issue in bringing about the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. However, we could see also the public health risks: these people had no latrines and no easy access to clean water, nor ways of storing it safely. In that case I proposed, initially against their will, to do water and sanitation projects, and only later to consider education – although that did follow in time.

By doing this, we were being accountable to the claimants by means of adherence to the principle of the right to life, as upheld through a public health programme designed to protect their lives. I hope that I did a good job of arguing the case for what I wanted to make our priority, that I kept people informed not only of what we intended to do when, but also how and why, and what role they needed to play in it all. In the fullest sense, the accountability we sought to have towards them was certainly about more than consultation, information, listening and participation.

There are, of course, practical constraints on being consultative with claimants or on beneficiary participation in conflict situations. Indeed, such activities can exacerbate the threats to claimants on the one hand, and on the other can be inimical to impartiality. Agencies might undertake opportunistic consultations and keep claimants informed as far as feasible, but accountability to the needs for protection and assistance in these situations may be best served by adherence to principles that allow agencies to operate; that is, the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence.

One of the uses of the Sphere minimum standards has been in the evaluation of the impact of humanitarian programmes, testing whether agencies have succeeded in providing what is needed by reference to those standards. Evaluations by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the UK have used the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct as a yardstick for measuring the behaviour of agencies while providing assistance. Both might be admirable ideas in themselves, but they need to be linked to the idea of accountability to claimants as much as to the behaviour of agencies. Accountability means setting standards, not just accepting them. It not only can but needs to be exercised through adherence to general principles as well as to consultative and participative methodologies.

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The accountability of states in humanitarian response

Debates about increasing accountability for humanitarian action – the ethics of what and how it is provided; who profits and who benefits – have focused on the accountability of NGOs to beneficiaries. Caroline Ford argues that other actors, states in particular, also merit scrutiny

States play major roles in determining the provision and form of humanitarian assistance: as donors, direct providers, belligerents and coordinators; and as recipients on behalf of communities in need. States also bear prime responsibility for the well-being of their people, and are the primary duty-holders for relieving suffering in times of catastrophe. Are states currently responsible or accountable in any way for the quality and ethics of humanitarian action? Part of the accountability debate requires an analysis of who holds responsibility for what – recognising that NGOs and states bear different responsibilities – and then who is held to account for discharging their responsibility. Including assessments of state responsibility within the accountability debate can add and enrich our own analysis of accountability: during the next decade, mechanisms that exist under international law for state accountability could be tightened and expanded in order to further their use for accountability for humanitarian action.

Accountability requires an independent, external and impartial mechanism that imposes sanction and ensures compliance, whereas responsibility is self-regulating: actors assess their own compliance and make the necessary changes. While state responsibility for humanitarian action under international law is clear, the external, independent mechanisms for holding states accountable are less well known to the humanitarian community.

State responsibility

In the legal sense, state responsibility has its basis in the notion of sovereignty, and is invoked under international law in many circumstances. Sovereignty means that all

states have supreme control over their internal affairs, and no state or international organisation may intervene in matters that fall within the domestic jurisdiction of another state. States as such are responsible for the overall well-being and protection of all people on their territory; the specifics of what is covered by well-being or protection are contained in the various human rights treaties and covenants, for example the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Attempts by outsiders to hold states accountable for how they treat their nationals have been fraught with legal difficulty owing to the primacy of the notion of sovereignty and domestic jurisdiction. However, the increasing attention to human rights issues has made it easier to examine a state's responsibility to protect people in other states. In 2000, a Commission of International Experts was set up to examine what, if any, legal and moral responsibility states held to protect civilians from armed aggression or humanitarian catastrophe, both within their own territories and, significantly, in other states. The resulting research, contained in the *Responsibility to Protect* documents, acknowledges that strict adherence to the notion of state sovereignty in times of humanitarian catastrophe is decreasing in legal and political validity. The Committee argues strongly that attention should be given to examining the responsibility states have for preventing and responding to human rights and humanitarian emergencies in other states.

What are states' legal responsibilities in times of humanitarian catastrophe? One obvious responsibility is with respect to the conduct of one's armed forces in peacekeeping operations and combat. States are obliged to ensure that their forces avoid grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions: that they ensure the distinction between combatants and civilians in conflict, treat those who are *hors de combat* (prisoners of war, medical staff, injured soldiers, civilians) with dignity, respect and in a humane manner, and punish individuals who violate these laws. In peacekeeping operations, states are responsible for ensuring that each individual soldier deployed complies with the applicable elements of IHL.

States engaged in combat also have a responsibility to ensure that their armed forces avoid sieges (starvation of communities) and allow the safe passage of food and medical supplies during the conflict. Some argue that this constitutes a *de facto* right of access for all NGOs, but the state's responsibility to provide assistance is not unlimited: states are not obliged to allow anyone who wishes entry to deliver assistance. Nor is the state required to provide assis-

State and government accountability

There is an important distinction between state and government accountability. *State accountability* refers to systems which make states answerable to other states through international law. A state remains accountable to other states whether the government changes through elections, or is removed or comes to power by force. *Government accountability* makes a government answerable to its own people, individually or collectively. Individual governments, if democratically elected, can be made accountable for their actions on polling day. An illegitimate government, a colony, or an occupied territory, however, offers its citizens little recourse to accountability for its actions. Thus, the international system of state accountability, rather than government accountability, offers more opportunities to humanitarian actors and populations in need.

tance itself; it can be argued that allowing others to provide relief is sufficient to fulfil its responsibility.

Under most domestic legislation, states are also responsible to their own people for the coordination of relief activities undertaken on their soil, and for the quality of humanitarian assistance delivered by external agencies. States normally require NGOs to coordinate with relevant government departments or ministries, and NGOs are required to adhere to national law and standards, for instance building codes. Additionally, states could fulfil this responsibility by requiring CVs or copies of professional qualifications to be registered with relevant ministries, or by reviewing the project proposals of NGOs wishing to operate within their territory. While as yet untested, it is possible that a state could be held accountable through its national courts for misconduct or malpractice by an international NGO delivering assistance on behalf of the state, or with the assistance of government structures.

It can also be argued that state responsibility is engaged by donors to recipient states for the quality of humanitarian assistance they support. This responsibility could be fulfilled by ensuring that donor-supported projects conform to international standards or professional codes. Furthermore, states are responsible for the actions of private companies or corporations operating on their soil or registered within their territory. Any ‘privatisation’ of humanitarian action, for instance if a donor or recipient state contracted a company to deliver food or provide logistical support, would engage state responsibility for the actions of that company.

It is not new that states are responsible for their actions which have an impact on, or are directly involved in, the delivery of humanitarian assistance. However, the establishment of accountability mechanisms which are external, independent and have the power to censure or sanction improper or illegal behaviour by states is a relatively recent phenomenon. While it may seem at first sight that there are few opportunities for holding states accountable, there are in fact some which humanitarian agencies can and should familiarise themselves with. Interest in such mechanisms continues to increase, and there is much scope both to demand further accountability, and to fully exploit the mechanisms that already exist.

Holding states to account

Two such mechanisms are human rights treaty bodies, and international tribunals.

Human rights treaties

With the increasing interest in linking human rights to humanitarian assistance, these mechanisms merit examination for their potential to hold states accountable for their actions in humanitarian emergencies.

Each human rights treaty has a formal mechanism whereby a Committee is formed to review states’ compliance with their obligations. Committee hearings have been criticised as not being tough enough on states which are known to be violators of human rights. However, these

hearings are open to outsiders, and many states take comments made by the Committee very seriously. When local NGOs presented an alternative report to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on poverty and the state’s lack of protection for the poor in Canada, the Committee took note. These NGOs alleged that widespread poverty, hunger and homelessness, together with massive cuts to social programmes, violated commitments Canada had made. The Committee publicly criticised the Canadian government harshly in 1993 and again in 1998, largely based on information presented by the NGO community, for its lack of action and its omission of these issues in its official report. As a result, Canada re-examined some of its policies.

While these Committees do not have the power to censure states or force remedial action, NGOs and civil society could use their public comments and recommendations when attempting to hold states accountable for their actions. The humanitarian community could present to these Committee hearings facts and findings on a state’s inappropriate or absent response to a humanitarian crisis. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, together with the Children’s Rights Convention, the Convention against Torture and regional human rights treaties, all have hearings at which NGOs may make presentations concerning state action. These presentations might be with regard to human rights protection in humanitarian contexts, or observing humanitarian standards as a realisation of human rights.

Tribunals

The ad hoc international tribunals set up following the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Cambodia offer another opportunity to hold states and their officials accountable for their actions. These tribunals were established by the UN Security Council under Chapter VI of the UN Charter – making it mandatory under international law for UN member states to cooperate fully. This cooperation includes the obligation to arrest and transfer an accused individual found on a state’s territory; facilitate the travel of witnesses; and provide access to documentary and other evidentiary materials.

The successes and failures of the international tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda are well known. However, the new courts for Sierra Leone and Cambodia offer a potential means for holding state officials accountable for actions causing humanitarian suffering, attacks on aid workers and withholding relief. In Sierra Leone, the Special Court is a ‘mixed’ tribunal with both international and domestic elements, thus combining national and international accountability measures. The court is designed to function for three years, and has the power to prosecute those ‘who bear the greatest responsibility’ for serious violations of international humanitarian law, and certain violations of Sierra Leone law committed in Sierra Leone since 30 November 1996. The court, which is expected to try 20 people, issued its first seven indictments in March 2003. Five individuals are currently in custody. The crimes alleged in the indictments include

murder, rape, extermination, acts of terror, enslavement, looting and burning, sexual slavery, the conscription of children into an armed force, and attacks on UN peacekeepers and humanitarian assistance workers.

On 6 June 2003, the UN and Cambodia signed an agreement which paves the way for a genocide tribunal to try former leaders of the Khmer Rouge. The plan, agreed in draft form in March, allows that the majority of the judges are Cambodian, but requires at least one foreign judge to support a tribunal ruling. As many of the deaths under the Khmer Rouge regime were caused by starvation, the court's potential ability to examine accountability issues around withholding assistance to enable communities to survive could prove extremely valuable.

The International Criminal Court

The largest step towards an independent body for holding state officials (and other individuals) accountable for their actions is the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC's jurisdiction commenced on 1 July 2002, and by May 2003 90 countries had ratified the treaty establishing it. In the first half of 2003, the ICC's chief prosecutor and its first 18 judges were elected (including seven women and representing all the regions of the world). The court is poised to commence business.

While US opposition is well known, the ICC does nonetheless offer an unprecedented opportunity to hold to account those responsible for international crimes – both as individuals and acting on behalf of the state. The ICC is able to investigate and prosecute people accused of crimes against humanity, genocide and crimes of war. These crimes include violations of IHL. The court complements existing national judicial systems, and will step in only if national courts are unwilling or unable to investigate or prosecute such crimes. The ICC represents a potential way of holding to account states which, for example, fail to protect civilians or do not permit humanitarian relief in conflict.

Conclusion

As humanitarians search for ways and means to be more accountable to the communities they aim to serve, it is important not to forget state accountability. States bear prime responsibility for the welfare of their people, and

under international law have the prime duty to ensure that humanitarian action is timely, appropriate and of a high standard. States are also responsible for preventing many of the causes of humanitarian suffering, and should be held to account for their roles in the humanitarian response. Some of the mechanisms that have been set up to deal with human rights violations and international crimes may be explored as a means to encourage states to hold each other to account. This is not to say that these mechanisms for state accountability are all fully functioning, or free from political interference. What is relevant is that state responsibility is different from the responsibility of NGOs in humanitarian crises, and thus the accountability issues are logically also going to be different. Finding meaningful ways to examine state accountability should improve and augment our own understanding of how humanitarian action should be accountable, and, most importantly, to whom.

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Good Humanitarian Donorship: a mouse or a lion?

The behaviour of donors in the humanitarian sphere matters because they have significant influence over the shape of global responses to humanitarian crises. Developing effective ways of holding donor governments to account for their roles and responsibilities in humanitarian action has long been a challenging pursuit. Here, Joanna Macrae and Adele Harmer report on a new – and unprecedented – initiative

Donor governments have been strong supporters of the various initiatives aimed at strengthening accountability and improving performance within the international humanitarian system. The majority have, however, concentrated on establishing standards and codes of conduct for opera-

tional aid agencies. Less attention has been paid to how donors are held to account for their policies, and the implications of their decision-making. Recent research by the Humanitarian Policy Group has found that mechanisms and lesson-learning in accountability are weak at national and

international levels. The research identifies the need to focus on strategic and political accountability, against clearly defined objectives and definitions of humanitarian assistance, in order to strengthen the checks and balances that govern donor behaviour.

The problems in donor accountability partly stem from the fact that the people suffering at the centre of a humanitarian crisis have no voice or access to the formal accountability mechanisms of donor governments. The links between donors and beneficiaries are particularly tenuous and indirect. The problem is also particular to the environment that aid departments operate in within their national governments. Humanitarian assistance is rarely just the concern of a single aid department; other, often more powerful, ministries are involved, and humanitarian aid programmes are at times, linked with a government's broader objectives and policies. This can lead to disagreement among donors and humanitarian actors as to what humanitarian aid is for, and how performance can be measured.

Underpinning these obstacles is the peculiar nature of humanitarian assistance. Unlike development assistance, the official donor contributions on which humanitarian aid relies are voluntary. This has undoubtedly influenced the incentives to evaluate and measure donor performance. As a comparison, donors have made significant progress, through the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD and other fora, in harmonising and standardising practice in development cooperation.

Research on accountable donorship

A recent HPG report entitled *Uncertain Power: The Changing Role of Official Donors in Humanitarian Action* examines the key obstacles to donor accountability. The report identifies weaknesses in all areas of official donors' accountability for humanitarian policies and action, and provides recommendations as to how checks and balances governing donor behaviour might be strengthened. The report suggests focusing on improved strategic and political accountability, against clearly defined strategic objectives and definitions of humanitarian assistance, followed through at the managerial and contractual levels.

Overall, the report identifies three overarching principles that might be used to inform official humanitarian donorship:

- a commitment to international law and humanitarian principles, including defining the distinctive purpose of official humanitarian assistance;
- a commitment to needs-based programming, including linking resources with need; and
- predictable, adequate and flexible funding.

To operationalise these principles and establish a framework through which donor performance could be measured, further steps were identified, including:

- a commitment in domestic law to the impartial allocation of official humanitarian aid;
- enhancing the capacity and engagement of parliamen-

tary committees and audit offices in reviewing humanitarian aid programmes;

- strengthening the role of the DAC in developing and monitoring humanitarian assistance issues; and
- ensuring regular, independent evaluations of donor programmes and system-wide evaluations.

The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative

The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative was launched at an international meeting on 15 and 16 June 2003 in Stockholm. Representatives of donor governments, UN agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and other organisations involved in humanitarian action gathered to reflect on donor behaviour, analyse challenges in the humanitarian system and lay the foundations for good humanitarian donorship.

The objectives of the meeting were three-fold:

- 1) To identify and agree the objectives and definition of humanitarian action
- 2) To identify and agree a set of Principles and Good Practice as a common platform of understanding for good humanitarian donorship.
- 3) To agree means for implementation and follow-up to put these into practice.

The launch of the initiative was an unprecedented event; never before have donor governments come together to agree objectives and a definition of humanitarian action, and general principles and good practice in the financing, management and accountability of humanitarian response. The meeting was organised around three thematic sessions:

- Meeting global basic humanitarian needs – the challenge to the international donor community
- Promoting coherent and effective donor response – basic principles and approaches
- Identifying steps towards more effective and accountable donor behaviour

There was lively debate both during the formal sessions and in the meeting margins. Speakers included the UN's Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, the UN Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator for Sudan; the Director of ECHO, the Assistant Secretary of State in the US Department of State, and the Director-General of the ICRC. The conference was attended by representatives of the 20 largest donors in the humanitarian sector, as well as representatives from UN humanitarian and development agencies, leading academics and researchers in the humanitarian field, the chairs of NGO steering groups and the head policy coordinator in the OECD-DAC.

Objectives and definition of humanitarian action

The final text endorsed in Stockholm was watered down a little from its original form, though the negotiations around it could be seen as an expression of donors' seriousness about what they were committing to. The objectives and definition of humanitarian action were as follows:

- The objectives of humanitarian action are to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations.
- Humanitarian action should be guided by the humanitarian principles of *humanity*, meaning the centrality of saving human lives and alleviating suffering wherever it is found; *impartiality*, meaning the implementation of actions solely on the basis of need, without discrimination between or within affected populations; *neutrality*, meaning that humanitarian action must not favour any side in an armed conflict or other dispute where such action is carried out; and *independence*, meaning the autonomy of humanitarian objectives from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.
- Humanitarian action includes the protection of civilians and those no longer taking part in hostilities, and the provision of food, water and sanitation, shelter, health services and other items of assistance, undertaken for the benefit of affected people and to facilitate the return to normal lives and livelihoods.

General principles

In negotiation over general principles, there was concern that donors could not reasonably commit to the ambitious target of ‘meeting the entirety of global humanitarian needs’, and this part of the text was removed.

The general principles of humanitarian action that were agreed included:

- Respect and promote the implementation of international humanitarian law, refugee law and human rights.
- Allocate humanitarian funding in proportion to needs and on the basis of needs assessments.
- Request implementing humanitarian organisations to ensure, to the greatest possible extent, adequate involvement of beneficiaries in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian response.

Good practice in donor financing, management and accountability

Here, there were difficulties in the text around the notion of burden-sharing – one donor emphasised the need to see this in relation to the totality of humanitarian needs, not in relation to any particular situation. Many participants agreed that, in particular, the identified practices in learning and accountability were narrow in scope and weak in relation to specific practice.

Key points endorsed included:

- An agreement to strive to ensure that the funding of humanitarian action in new crises does not adversely affect ongoing crises.
- An agreement to encourage regular evaluations of

international responses to humanitarian crises, including assessments of donor performance.

- A commitment to ensure a high degree of accuracy, timeliness and transparency in donor reporting on official humanitarian assistance spending, and to encourage the development of standardised formats for such reporting.
- While stressing the importance of transparent and strategic priority-setting and financial planning by implementing organisations, explore the possibility of reducing, or enhancing the flexibility of, earmarking, and of introducing longer-term funding arrangements.

Where now?

The significance of what was achieved at Stockholm should not be underestimated. The months of preparatory work by donor governments and key organisations to develop the agenda, and to draft, negotiate and find consensus on the proposed text, was ultimately rewarded. Despite this, the real work towards good donorship is yet to be done. A number of participants posed the ‘so what?’ question, not to dismiss the agenda, but to challenge donors to articulate what would be different after the meeting.

An Implementation Plan, endorsed by all participants in Stockholm, sets out five initial activities. The plan will be implemented with the management and oversight of a group of donor representatives in Geneva, co-chaired by the Swedish and Canadian governments. Through this plan, donor governments’ commitment to the principles of humanitarianism will be tested; it also provides an opportunity for interested stakeholders to promote and pursue the good donorship agenda to ensure that the distinctive principles of humanitarianism become established norms in donor behaviour. The five activities are as follows:

- No later than 2004/05, interested donors will identify, in consultation with humanitarian organisations, at least one crisis subject to a Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal, to which the Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship will be applied in a concerted and coordinated manner.
- Donors will invite the OECD-DAC to consider ways to strengthen the coverage of humanitarian action in existing and/or complementary peer reviews.
- Donors undertake to jointly explore the possibility of harmonising reporting requirements and the management demands placed upon implementing organisations.
- Donors will aim, in consultation with the UN and the OECD-DAC, to agree a comprehensive common definition of official humanitarian assistance for reporting and statistical purposes, including clarity of definitions between multilateral and bilateral humanitarian assistance.
- Participating donors will seek to promote the wider use among all official donors of the Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship, and invite all interested donors to participate in the follow-up of this plan.

Reflections on good humanitarian donorship

A number of participants at the Stockholm meeting expressed concern that the conclusions did not go far enough – that they made the timid squeak of a mouse, rather than the roar of a lion. Others noted that one of the most important goals, not included in the Stockholm conclusions, was a commitment to the impartial allocation of official humanitarian aid in domestic law.

At the same time, many saw the Stockholm meeting as an historic marker, perhaps one of the most positive developments for the humanitarian donor community in recent years. The meeting established the distinctiveness of the humanitarian agenda, as a subset of aid policy. It established a set of shared, commonly agreed objectives for, and a definition of, humanitarian action, as well as a set of general principles and good practice for good donorship, including a principle to respect and promote international humanitarian law, refugee law and human rights; a commitment to allocate funding in proportion to needs; and a commitment to strive to ensure predictable and flexible funding.

The challenge now is to make respect for the distinctive principles of humanitarianism and elements of good practice norms in donor behaviour. Meaningful shifts in donor behaviour tend to come about from a combination of internal commitment and resources for institutional change, and external pressure – from non-governmental organisations and from other donors. In taking the initiative forward, donors recognise that they need to become better humanitarian advocates within their own aid departments, within the wider government, and with their public constituents. Humanitarian organisations, both

individually and collectively, need to maintain a critical dialogue on the good donorship initiative, as advocates, monitors and scrutinisers of donor progress and performance, so that the momentum of the meeting is not lost, and the initiative remains firmly at the heart of the international humanitarian agenda.

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Humanitarian action and the 'global war on terror': a review of trends and issues

HPG Report 14, July 2003

Edited by Joanna Macrae and Adele Harmer

Humanitarian action is profoundly shaped by the geopolitical context in which it takes place, as well as by more local and national politics. The bombing of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 changed the geopolitical landscape radically, with important consequences not only for patterns of conflict and vulnerability around the world, but also for humanitarian response.

This report is the second in a series of annual reviews of key trends in international humanitarian action. It comprises four commissioned papers by international experts on:

- the legal implications of the global war on terrorism;
- the implications of 9/11 for humanitarian NGOs;
- humanitarianism and Islam; and
- Afghanistan post-9/11.

It also draws on the burgeoning literature concerning the origins, dynamics and nature of the global war on terrorism to assess its implications for humanitarian organisations and for vulnerability of populations.

For more details, see the HPG website at ODI (www.odi.org.uk/hpg/publications.html).

West Africa scandal points to need for humanitarian watchdog

The humanitarian world was rocked in 2002 by a UNHCR/Save the Children study which revealed a disturbing pattern of sexual exploitation of refugee children by aid workers and peacekeepers in West Africa. Asmita Naik argues that the gaps in accountability revealed by the scandal point to the need for a humanitarian watchdog

In October 2001, a UNHCR/Save the Children assessment team visiting Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone unexpectedly came across allegations of abuse by humanitarian workers during the course of a broader sociological study on sexual violence and exploitation of refugee children. The study, begun with no intention of investigating aid workers, found these claims repeated in focus groups and interviews in all three countries, in camps hundreds of miles apart. The team confidentially noted allegations concerning 67 perpetrators, 42 agencies, 40 child victims, and 80 separate sources, plus additional cases involving unnamed peacekeepers. Young girls reported exchanging sex for desperately-needed humanitarian assistance – biscuits, soap, medicines – or meagre sums of money.

The response of the humanitarian community

The report prompted an international outcry and a frenzy of media attention when it hit the headlines in February 2002. A record 30 delegations took the floor at a subsequent UNHCR Executive Committee meeting; some called the situation an ‘indictment of UNHCR’s protection regime’. After the initial furore, a mixed response emerged. On the one hand, the humanitarian world rallied to address the issues raised by the report. Working groups were set up, including the Inter-agency Standing Committee Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises, chaired by UNICEF and OCHA. Meetings were held; missions conducted; and plans of action agreed. Reports from UNICEF/Caritas Makeni, Interaction, the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children and others affirmed the reality of the problem. Donor governments set up an informal working group under the UNHCR Executive Committee to monitor progress.

At the same time, there were also attempts to deny the validity of the claims of abuse. The UN discredited the report’s methodology and dismissed its findings. In a CNN interview in May 2002, Ruud Lubbers, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, stated that ‘we hardly find concrete evidence. It’s very scarce’, and doubted that the cases described in the report constituted exploitation at all: ‘(the) mother is only happy when it happens, because it is one person less to feed’; ‘mothers are just delighted when [their daughters] can find a husband’. The interviewer replied, ‘There’s no talk from the girls or UNHCR’s own report of anything even remotely approaching romance’. UNHCR staff were also dismayed; a memo to Lubbers from UNHCR’s staff association complained that his remarks ‘appeared to imply’ that ‘exploitation and abuse of power is culturally relative’, that ‘allegations of sexual exploitation are unfounded’ and that ‘the women and girls concerned are not to be believed’.

Victims’ voices: testimonies of abuse from West Africa

‘I leave my child with my little sister, who is ten years old, and I dress good and I go where the NGO workers drink or live and one of them will ask me for sex, sometimes they give me things like food, oil, soap and I will sell them and get money’.

Refugee child

‘When ma asked me to go to the stream to wash plates, a peacekeeper asked me to take my clothes off so that he can take a picture. When I asked him to give me money he told me, no money for children only biscuit’.

Refugee child

‘They change girls so much and none of them marry the girls and if she becomes pregnant she is abandoned, with no support for herself and the child. Most of us used to just look at them and wonder. Our brothers, they have a problem’.

Aid worker

In October 2002, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) released a report which claimed that its follow-up investigation had found ‘no widespread abuse by aid workers’. This prompted criticisms that the UN was trying to play down the matter, and raised questions about the adequacy of its follow-up. Save the Children UK, a partner in the original study, responded that ‘Nothing that the UN has found makes us think that we were wrong’. The Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP) stated that the ‘objective of the UN inquiry was too limited’, and Human Rights Watch remarked that OIOS ‘was widely criticized as downplaying the problem’. An unnamed UN official working to combat the problem told a women’s magazine: ‘the UN is not taking the problem seriously enough ... the response has been a shrug, as if sex with kids by peacekeepers was a perk of the trade. We’re fighting a culture of sexism that exists even at UN headquarters’.

By this time, government outrage had all but dissipated and, despite serious concerns, few were willing to challenge the findings of the OIOS investigation. Australia, Canada and New Zealand were among the few countries prepared to pose searching questions; in a joint statement to the General Assembly in March 2003, these governments asked: ‘Was the investigative lens too narrow? Is there any way to know if the findings would have been different if they were less narrow? ... Was the

necessary gender and children’s rights expertise participating? What arrangements were made for the confidentiality and protection of potential complainants?’. Very few news outlets covered the UN’s findings, and those that did appeared to accept the official line.

Outcomes

1. Very few perpetrators were disciplined

The OIOS documented 43 new allegations, and deemed that ten of these met the high burden of proof required to take action. Little action has been taken even on these 10 cases. According to one UNHCR official: ‘It has been very difficult to obtain the dismissal of the 10 aid workers involved in sexual exploitation or crimes from their respective employers in West Africa ... The experience in West Africa and elsewhere suggests that several refugee aid organizations are still very reluctant to discipline their staff and tend to downplay the seriousness of some acts of misconduct. These remarks also apply to UNHCR’.

OIOS reported action on two cases: a UN worker had his contract terminated, and a UN peacekeeper was sent home (it is unknown if he was disciplined or charged). Save the Children took action against three workers. The victims of more than 67 alleged perpetrators were left without any redress, as the OIOS claimed that it could not substantiate any of the allegations in the original assessment.

2. No perpetrators were criminally prosecuted¹

3. It is unknown whether victims and witnesses were adequately protected or compensated

4. No senior managers were held accountable for failing to respond to earlier reports

Sexual exploitation by aid workers had been brought to the attention of senior UNHCR managers in several reports, dating back to 1997.

5. No senior managers were held accountable for their handling of the allegations submitted by the assessment team

There is no indication that senior managers were held accountable for the way the allegations were dealt with, for instance as regards the quality of decision-making and levels of efficiency or commitment, or made answerable for diminishing the claims of abuse.

6. Some preventive measures are in place

There have been some new initiatives, for instance coordination measures, training and information campaigns, and sexual and gender-based violence programming. Some agencies adopted codes of conduct, though it is unclear whether these are legally binding or stringent enough, or whether they will actually be implemented. Several agencies still do not have codes, and rules for refugee workers have not been established in

¹ UNHCR official.



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A depiction of camp life. This photograph is not intended to imply that the people appearing in it are victims of sexual exploitation

many camps. Some aid agencies continue to believe that the private lives of their employees are their own business; according to a UNHCR official, the ‘principal gap’ remains the lack of ‘effective complaints mechanisms’.

7. There have been some improvements in beneficiary protection

The scandal had wider implications beyond sexual exploitation, and beyond West Africa. New scandals in Zimbabwe, Kenya and Nepal resulted in swifter disciplinary action against perpetrators and managers, though some controversy surrounds these cases too. An investigations unit has been established at UNHCR covering all forms of staff misconduct. The number of complaints has increased, indicating a greater awareness of issues of professional integrity. Insiders report an energetic pursuit of cases by the investigations unit, as well as a new and welcome transparency in the approach of some managers.

These encouraging changes should not be reasons for complacency, nor should they be assumed to represent deep institutional change. As one UNHCR official noted, ‘The limited progress achieved in some countries should not conceal the considerable challenges ahead’; significant gaps remain between rhetoric and reality; ‘between awareness at headquarters and in the field; and between the achievements that agencies report, and what has really been achieved for beneficiaries and victims.’

An independent humanitarian watchdog

Existing mechanisms clearly did not ensure accountability to the victims of this scandal. The efforts made at the policy level did not translate into satisfactory outcomes for victims on the ground. Much focus was placed on discussing important preventive and remedial measures, but not enough was done to challenge attempts to deny the claims of abuse. Statements undermining the victims sent the wrong political message and must inevitably be partly to blame for the poor outcome. The failure of governments and human rights and humanitarian organisations to check these denials did a disservice to the victims, and in the end undermined these organisations' own positive work.

Humanitarian actors did not do more because it was not in their interest to do so – other political or institutional interests took precedence over defending the interests of the victims. Some stakeholders in host countries may have lacked the power and capacity to call international bodies to account. Other stakeholders in donor countries (parliaments, pressure groups, regulatory bodies) may have lacked interest, or lacked the information they needed to act.

A lacuna in humanitarian accountability emerges when one compares similar cases in developed countries. Victims in such situations have greater recourse in the law. By contrast, the weakened legal systems in war-torn countries mean *de facto* immunity from criminal and negligence liability, both for individuals and for employers. The UN and its staff have the added protection of diplomatic immunity. Western aid agencies are obviously less accountable when working in developing countries than would be the case for programmes at home, where the media, parliament, advocacy groups and the law provide greater scrutiny.

Accountability is an issue in all operations. The absence of a global independent structure to take up complaints means that they emerge in an ad hoc, tortuous way, usually resulting in little redress for the victims and harsh retribution for the complainants. In November 2002, an employment tribunal found that a whistleblower in a trafficking scandal implicating international personnel in Bosnia suffered 'extraordinarily callous, spiteful and vindictive' treatment at the hands of her employer, Dyncorp.² In another case, complainants who disseminated information about the infiltration by paedophiles³ of the Ethiopian programme of Swiss children's charity Terre des Hommes (TdH) face a defamation suit brought by the charity in the Ethiopian courts.⁴

Since the shortcomings of humanitarian action in Rwanda in the mid-1990s, the humanitarian community has recognised the need for a more systematic approach. Measures such as the Sphere project, People in Aid, ALNAP and HAP address important elements of accountability, namely the

provision of technical support, standards, training, and regulation. However, earlier discussions concerning the establishment of a humanitarian ombudsman mechanism have not come to fruition.

There is a need for an independent humanitarian watchdog. Such a body could monitor developments; carry out its own investigations on the ground; lobby governments, parliaments, agencies and the media; and generally be a voice for the beneficiaries of aid, and the taxpayers that fund it. The absence of a transparent and public account of what actually happened in the West African camps, and the lack of independent verification of changes on the ground, mean that a full and objective overview is not available. Progress towards setting up complaints mechanisms is slow. Inevitably, even when these are established there will be question-marks over the independence of bodies set up by aid agencies themselves. A humanitarian watchdog would bring the sector into line with other areas of public life which already have government and corporate monitors. The dust may have settled on the West Africa scandal, but it has left a disquieting aftertaste that justice was not done. Few governments or organisations spoke as stridently as the victims themselves would have done had they been given a platform to do so. The need remains for a truly independent body to hold all humanitarian actors to account.

Asmita Naik is an independent consultant on human rights and humanitarian issues. Reproduction of this text in whole, part or any other form requires the prior consent of the author.

Asmita was a UNHCR participant in the UNHCR/Save the Children assessment *Sexual Violence and Exploitation: The Experience of Refugee Children in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone*. The full assessment is available on request from Save the Children UK or UNHCR. An executive summary of initial findings and recommendations made public by UNHCR is available online at: www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/openssl.pdf?id=3c7cf89a4&tbl=PARTNERS.

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² See British newspaper *The Guardian*, 27 November 2002.

³ TdH press release 26/01/01

⁴ Author interview with TdH.

Accountability and humanitarian actors: speculations and questions

Accountability is a relatively straightforward concept. So why, asks Austen Davis, is humanitarian accountability so peculiarly complex?

As humanitarians, we work for people who have been victimised, which means they have had their rights as citizens and their human dignity denied. We work in highly unaccountable environments. Accountability is one of those unquestionably ‘good things’ that it is taboo even to question, but what it actually means is far from clear. Who is accountable, for what and to whom? The relationships that allow independent humanitarian action mean we have to be accountable to those who give, those who do and those who receive – but are these all part of the same set of accountability concerns?

Accountability means simply being able to be held to account for one’s actions, and implies a degree of responsibility for those actions. To be accountable one has to be clear about the specific limits of responsibility of the actor in question. Second, the objectives of the actor have to be clear and legitimate. It seems to be extremely difficult to define humanitarianism. Are soldiers intervening in Kosovo to prevent massacres and ethnic cleansing humanitarian? Are soldiers giving out water and food in Iraq humanitarian? Is the FAO a humanitarian agency (as claimed in some fundraising)? Is Oxfam humanitarian when it calls for non-intervention in Iraq on the basis of likely civilian needs? Is MSF withdrawing from North Korea in the face of manipulation humanitarian? Is the Red Cross refusing to publicly expose massive and organised abuse humanitarian? Whatever your take on what humanitarianism is, there is clearly a very broad use of the term and a wide understanding of what it means, and hence what humanitarian responsibility entails. Without the capacity to be explicit and precise about objectives, it is unlikely that accountability can be enhanced as a one-size-fits-all initiative.

Humanitarian charters or the commitments of aid agencies normally refer to saving life, alleviating suffering, protecting and enhancing human dignity and (for some) contributing to the capacity of the individual to make his or her own choices concerning their own life. But even this range of objectives is broad and cannot be measured on the same scale. How do you compare the value of a mission that was successful in reducing mortality rates with one that was successful in restoring human dignity? If there are too many axes of worth, then any critic can either condemn or praise every action.

A series of initiatives has aimed at improving the quality and coherence of humanitarian action – the Sphere project, ALNAP, the Humanitarian Ombudsman project, the Humanitarian Accountability Project, the ‘Good Donorship’ review. Most are multi-agency initiatives with heavy backing from the UN or NGOs, and heavy donor government involvement. It is this that condemns the whole accountability process.

Misconception no. 1: the ‘international community’ fulfils its humanitarian responsibilities by acting through the ‘humanitarian system’

These two phrases sum up a great deal about where we go wrong in promoting and developing humanitarian action. The development of extensive mutual involvement of donor governments, UN agencies and a vast array of NGOs as humanitarian actors – all meeting in the same conferences and having interlocking funding and communication agendas – has promoted a false sense of combined and coherent action. Differences of purpose and responsibility have been blurred to such an extent that it is impossible to say who is responsible for doing what: we are all the same, cogs in one vast machine with a single benevolent purpose.

If this were really true, systemic attempts to promote accountability might perhaps function. But there is in fact no such thing as the ‘international community’ – there are international relations, but the peoples of the earth, their nations, their states and their leaders, hardly behave as a single community. And there is no such thing as the ‘humanitarian system’ – there are various actors with interdependent relations, but they are hardly all oriented towards the same goals. The mixing of multiple agendas (such as peace, development and economic or political interests) with humanitarian objectives undermines the single-minded purpose that must characterise any humanitarian system.¹ This misconception is critical as it allows the formation and perpetuation of a false view of what humanitarian action is about – how the actors inter-relate and what the challenges are. It necessarily dictates false answers to falsely conceived problems and allows responsibilities to be avoided – which ultimately kills.

Misconception no. 2: humanitarian action is simply short-term relief aimed at saving lives

However much we talk about dignity, freedom of choice, the morality of humanitarian action and human compassion and solidarity, we normally then move on to the serious business of measuring mortality and malnutrition rates. Systemic approaches towards accountability necessarily focus on the generic over the specific; the measurable over the intentional; and the preferences of funders over those of victims. Quality of action is not a minor

¹ A system implies a complex organisation of parts to generate a whole, oriented to achieving something. Humanitarianism seeks to respond to the human being in the midst of social and political crisis. Therefore, it must explicitly distinguish itself from good or bad agendas such as peace, development or political projects as a means to enter politically-contested environments to provide assistance and demonstrate human compassion and solidarity to victims of crisis. The system is neither systemic nor humanitarian in character.

concern. We are working in other people's societies and in moments of shocking disregard for life, people and society. We cannot afford to go in armed only with good intentions. We have to be good, we have to be wanted, and we have to use our scarce resources to do as much as we can as well as we can. This has to involve more than reduced mortality rates.

We are currently working under bizarre circumstances whereby our sector orients itself towards standardisation, quality and accountability agendas driven largely by government donors which also seek to reduce the costs of humanitarian action. The same promoters of quality also promote a cost-effectiveness that is oriented towards reducing costs above enhancing quality. The result is a form of assistance that largely ignores the conditions of delivery, presence and solidarity and the risks of the co-option and abuse of humanitarian assistance as a means to control victims of crisis.

Misconception no. 3: the failure of accountability is the most significant failure of humanitarian agencies

This misconception states that the failure of humanitarian accountability is the fault of humanitarian agencies, and that it is morally unacceptable that they do not improve. This ignores a real problem with accountability – we act in other people's societies and so are accountable to their laws. But we act because a society has failed to look after the basic needs of some people, and so we work in contradiction to the powers in the society that we are accountable to. We obtain our funding and our legitimacy from Western publics. Do we answer to private givers, to government donors, to multilateral technocratic donors (ECHO, the UN), to local authorities or to victims? Ultimately, we should be primarily accountable to victims. However, the idea that this means that we need greater community participation is a dangerous over-simplification. The degree to which a humanitarian worker can be accountable to people in societies that have been destroyed from within is questionable. Humanitarian workers act within highly politicised and biased environments. There are few institutions that have not been touched or tainted; if you rely on them and they become responsible for directing resources, they are often co-opted and corrupted. How can one seek to be accountable to victims when the nature of victimisation means disempowerment, control, manipulation and abuse?

Everyone has a personal story illustrating abuse of authority. Here is a very undramatic one: I once worked in a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast, where 'community leaders' asked why we spent so much money providing care to people; if we just gave them the drugs, they would distribute them equally and we could afford to buy more. I carefully explained to them that if we provided enough drugs and distributed them equally to everyone, this would not ensure better health – there is a difference between equity and equality – and you do not always want to disclose to the powerful one's need for care. In our own societies, we do not manage complex welfare programmes and health care systems purely through the

dictates of beneficiary preference. We have laws, professional institutions, specialist media and other instruments to seek patient perspectives. Accountability and regulation is a sophisticated and multi-dimensional affair. Humanitarian workers are usually quite young and inexperienced, and have to work in the reality of their context – not all people have the experience and political knowledge to ensure good management of a process of negotiation and articulation of need and response. In broken societies, the complex institutional architecture needed to generate adequate checks and balances simply does not exist. This is not our fault.

We must remember that victims are victims. Humanitarians work in difficult places, with limited power and capacities, but this does not mean that we should give up. Not everything is our fault and we cannot fix everything. We have to be clear what our responsibilities are and what we are able to do; and we have to be very clear what we cannot do and where others have responsibility, or we will end up simply providing charity and reinforcing oppression, abuse and exclusion. External powers have some responsibility to act to protect ordinary people, but these responsibilities are much contested in international law and only sporadically applied. Local powers have the responsibility to ensure the rights, freedoms and welfare of their people – do not confuse responsibilities. We need to ensure that we do not unwittingly take on their responsibilities, or point the finger.

Misconception no. 4: humanitarian aid is non-political, so politicians, the UN and NGOs can all sit at the same table to build a global humanitarian system

Humanitarian action seeks to alleviate suffering. Humanitarianism is predicated on a shared value for human life. Political adversaries are encouraged to allow humanitarian actors to intervene with the deal that we will serve the civilian population, promoting human life and dignity and not making partisan choices to support one side or one political project over another.

This does not mean that humanitarian action is reduced to simple charity – the giving of assistance to alleviate pain without challenge to the status quo. Humanitarian assistance is provided in deeply challenging conditions in places where human beings are being degraded, humiliated and abused. The presence of humanitarian actors demonstrates (rather than substitutes for) political failure. Humanitarian action has a radical and anti-authoritarian character that is essential in reducing the dangers of manipulation and co-option, turning our help against the people we try to help. Belligerent governments, donor governments, UN agencies and the vast array of NGOs have different objectives and responsibilities which should be enhanced to encourage realistic solutions to problems, rather than maintaining the current irresponsible delusion of collective oneness.

Humanitarian actors have to be accountable to multiple donors, to local authorities, but principally to the victims of crisis. These responsibilities are often at odds, the chief

problem being that local authorities are often the victimisers, while international donors make excuses for their inaction. This makes the issue of accountability to victims complex and highly contextual. Accountability to victims is often a struggle in the face of power and is highly dependent on the political savvy of aid workers (which can be encouraged and supported by agencies) and the professional standards and drives of the agency and its staff.

A sectoral or systemic attempt to generate humanitarian accountability has little currency. It blurs responsibilities and differences of capacity; without a clear determination of objectives and legitimacy, an agency cannot be held accountable. Instead, each organisation has to be clear about what it is trying to do. Each organisation has to negotiate the terms of access and action with all the parties it confronts, not allowing the UN to negotiate and

administer joint access and modes of operation. Each organisation has a responsibility to offer quality assistance (sharing lessons learned) through the development of professional standards and training, and to be open and transparent to other actors and the media about what they do, the risks they take and their successes and failures.

Accountability systems that genuinely contribute to the development of better, faster and braver humanitarian action would be well worth the investment. But initiatives which take up time, blur responsibilities and build illusions without enhancing the quality or speed of humanitarian action are taking resources away from important work. It is time we asked ourselves where the balance lies now.

Austen Davis is general director of MSF-Holland.

The Livelihoods and Chronic Conflict Working Paper Series **Catherine Longley and Karim Hussein, Series Editors**

ODI has published ten papers in the Livelihoods and Chronic Conflict Working Paper Series, reviewing the range of ways in which livelihoods approaches are used by operational agencies and researchers working in situations of chronic conflict and political instability. The series documents current practice and highlights lessons for more effective policies, needs assessment and aid programming to support livelihoods in protracted conflict. Full texts of the papers are available at http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/working_papers/livelihood_chronic_conflict.html.

The application of a livelihoods framework to situations of chronic conflict and political instability requires that:

- vulnerability is placed more centrally;
- political economy is integrated into the analysis; and
- a temporal dimension including the pre-conflict situation is included.

Livelihoods analysis can get beyond an overt focus on ‘the conflict’ to consider a longer historical trajectory of change and present a differentiated understanding of the impacts of and responses to conflict. Livelihoods programming requires a deeper level of contextual understanding than conventional humanitarian interventions: although a wealth of assessment tools exist, challenges remain in the identification of appropriate forms of livelihood support.

Given the highly context-specific nature of livelihoods and chronic conflict, there is no blueprint approach to providing livelihood support, but detailed assessment, flexibility, participation and capacity-building are all essential elements. Livelihoods interventions in situations of chronic conflict must have the ability to incorporate both ‘relief’ and ‘development’ modes of operation; what might otherwise be regarded as life-saving humanitarian assistance can be programmed to provide livelihoods support. What is important is the rationale on which the assistance is provided and the way in which it is programmed and delivered. Capacity-building as part of a livelihoods approach includes a range of possibilities: enhancing productive assets; skills training among individuals and groups in target communities; building capacity within implementing agencies; and awareness-raising at national and international levels through advocacy campaigns.

There remains considerable debate as to whether livelihoods approaches in chronic conflict situations are compatible with the humanitarian principles, particularly independence, neutrality and impartiality.

Meeting humanitarian need in post-conflict environments

Roger Persichino argues that the time has come for a rethink of 'developmental relief' after conflict

This year, two long-standing conflicts – in Sri Lanka and Sudan – are expected to come to at least a technical end. In each, peace processes are gaining momentum, and are widely anticipated to translate into comprehensive agreements to end hostilities. When this happens, both countries are likely to attract widespread attention. Yet the systemic breakdown that characterises both countries might not be addressed in the immediate aftermath of any formal agreement, warranting continued humanitarian assistance for a significant period after the end of the conflict. At the same time, funding priorities might shift towards developmental work, rather than relief. This article examines one particular question that countries like Sri Lanka and Sudan raise: the evolution of financial instruments made available to the aid community in the transition from complex emergencies to post-conflict environments.

Identifying complex emergencies

Inclusion in the UN's Consolidated Appeals Process (CAPs) is one indicator of whether a country is regarded as a complex emergency. Table 1 summarises the position in Africa in 2003, as indicated by the number and location of CAPs. The CAP is a programming and fundraising mechanism through which international, regional and national relief systems mobilise and respond to major and complex emergencies requiring a system-wide response to humanitarian crises. Led by the UN, it involves UN bodies and other humanitarian organisations, international financial institutions, donors and host governments.

In Africa, about 20 countries out of 57 fell under a CAP in 2003, and could thus be considered complex emergen-

cies. Yet a majority of these are deemed at peace, or going through various stages of a peace process. Only three countries are actually considered as fully outside the reach of peace at present. This is significant since, as the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) noted in 2002, 'Consolidated Appeals for countries that are in the process of transition from relief to development have been worst funded'.

The case of the DRC

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is going through the motions of peace following an agreement between warring parties, signed in South Africa in December 2002. This was the conclusion of a process that started in Lusaka, Tanzania, in 1999.

The humanitarian situation in the DRC is by all accounts dire, with an estimated 3.3 million excess deaths caused by the war since 1996, according to the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The position is particularly grave in the Kivus and Ituri, in the east of the country. In the Ituri capital of Bunia, repeated human rights abuse and faction-fighting – which at some points involved ten-plus national and international armed actors – have led to substantial displacement and humanitarian issues. The UN mission to the DRC, MONUC, has a limited mandate and has been unable to address the situation. MONUC has been augmented by a French-led military contingent deployed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter with a stronger mandate, thus allowing for the armed protection of civilians. It is hoped that this deployment, Operation Artemis, may help restore a sense of security in the area,

Table 1: CAPs in Africa, 2003

Countries at peace	Countries going through a peace process (pre- or post-agreement)	Countries at war
Swaziland	Sudan	Central African Republic
Ethiopia	Burundi	Somalia
Eritrea	Côte d'Ivoire	Liberia
Kenya	Sierra Leone	
Rwanda	Congo (Brazzaville)	
Tanzania	Angola	
Uganda	DRC	
Malawi		
Zambia		
Zimbabwe		

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA)

and allow the aid community to deliver relief assistance in Ituri. Artemis is significant in the sense that UN military deployments under Chapter VII are relatively rare, and thus a sign of the magnitude of the needs affecting the area.

Judging by contributions to the CAP, the international community significantly stepped up its support to relief activities from 2000: baseline contributions, which stood at about \$10m in 1999, leapt to an average of \$67m from 2000 to 2002. In 2003, ECHO's Global Plan for the DRC (east and west) called for over 31m euros; discussions with other emergency donors suggest that relief funds for the Kivus and Ituri will be comparable to previous years.

At the same time, assistance to relief operations in the Kinshasa-controlled areas of the country will be significantly reduced in 2003, and support to development projects and bilateral assistance will significantly increase. It is expected that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank will develop a \$1 billion loan package to support the restructuring of the DRC's largest firm, the mining concern Gécamines. An additional \$5bn might be released to redevelop the road from Matadi to Lubumbashi through Kinshasa. These amounts, while in the billions, represent only a portion of the development assistance that the international community contemplates giving or lending to the DRC.

Clearly, the total will dwarf the amount of relief assistance currently being channelled to the country; indeed, the \$6bn anticipated for the Gécamines and road projects alone is *already* equivalent to the overall relief aid disbursed worldwide in 2000. While no one would dispute prioritising eastern DRC over other parts of the country in terms of humanitarian aid, the focus on development assistance in Kinshasa-controlled areas seems inadequate, both in view of the continued scale of need, and in terms of the financial instruments employed.

Development aims and relief needs: the situation in Lubumbashi

Lubumbashi, in the south, was primarily dependent on Gécamines, which provided employment and income to a large portion of the population. Misappropriation of funds and assets in Gécamines over several decades clearly called for a substantial restructuring, which is the focus of the World Bank/IMF Gécamines package. As a result of the conditionalities laid out in this package, approximately 20,000 people have been dismissed from Gécamines in the last year, in addition to the 100,000 who were laid off previously. The result is a decrease in overall expendable income in the city, which in turn has led to a decrease in access to food. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), in 2002 one-fifth of the population was down to a single meal per day.



Malanje: ruined health infrastructure in post-conflict Angola

©Frances Stevenson

There is no 'classic' humanitarian emergency in Lubumbashi. According to Action Against Hunger (AAH), levels of severe malnutrition are low, and certainly far below emergency levels. Yet in a city of 1.5m, they are sufficient to warrant the treatment of over 800 patients per month. This is one of the largest caseloads ever recorded in one location by AAH. Support to existing infrastructure is barely enough to cope with the situation. This situation is not critical, but it is of serious concern. However, emergency donors are shying away from financial support in Lubumbashi, as the situation does not meet traditional disaster criteria and is thought to fall squarely into the realm of development assistance. Furthermore, the more straightforward emergencies in eastern DRC legitimately call for a prioritisation of limited resources. The contribution of the World Bank and the IMF to the situation in Lubumbashi is not oriented towards emergency needs; reshaping Gécamines will benefit the population, but only after a significant period of time.

Development aims and relief needs: the health sector

USAID supports the national health infrastructure in the DRC through grants to NGOs in over 60 districts, amounting to an estimated \$10m a year. This is not enough to support staff salaries, and the money is tied to a cost-recovery system, whereby consultations are billed at 4,000 Francs Congolais (slightly under \$10 at prevailing rates, i.e. the average monthly salary in Kinshasa). This approach is clearly geared towards developing the long-term viability of the health sector in the DRC, but it is inadequate in view of the current situation, needs and capacities of the Congolese population. For example, in an area of the southern province of Katanga, AAH noted that consultations billed at the suggested fee of FC4,000 translated into about 50 consultations a month; a reduction in the fee to FC50 increased the number of consultations to over 1,000 a month. This does not detract from the overall soundness of a cost-recovery approach, but it does suggest, at a minimum, that heavy subsidies are needed in the short to medium term.

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Classic assistance to the Ministry of Health is therefore much needed, but the general decay of government structures in the DRC suggests that corruption will remain an issue for a significant period of time. Thus, there should also be adjacent funding to NGOs for health services in such locations as Lubumbashi. In Sri Lanka, a donor meeting in Tokyo is widely anticipated to pledge funds that could be released to a whole range of stakeholders, including the government, NGOs and the former armed opposition, in order to address a wide range of needs following the end of the conflict. Donor discussions held in The Hague in early April 2003, in the context of peace talks in Sudan, also sought to develop creative financial instruments adapted to post-conflict environments.

Conclusions

Donors have clear preferences for funding in post-conflict environments: assistance should be closely coordinated, and should bolster incipient national institutions. In addition, there is an emphasis on 'quick-impact projects', so that relief work can make the 'benefits' of peace appear tangible. Finally, there is a clear need and demand for programmes that are national in scope.

While peace usually leads to increased donor support, adequate financial instruments to address post-conflict environments are only beginning to emerge. Direct bilateral assistance cannot address issues related to the delivery of services through structures that have been affected by the conflict. The degree to which these structures need to be supported before they can be expected to be functional varies from place to place: for example, the Sri Lankan authorities are immeasurably better equipped than their counterparts in the DRC. Yet in both cases, post-conflict assistance remains heavily oriented towards governmental structures. This is problematic for at least two reasons: first, it may reinforce the factors that fuelled the conflict in the first place. It thus puts greater pressure on the peace process, by potentially undermining support for peace among groups that may resent this bias towards government. Second, financial options remain limited; institutional donors have few avenues other than direct support to relief, and bilateral assistance. The emphasis on assistance to the government is a direct function of the desire to consolidate the peace process, yet it does not address the 'urge to develop' sought in most cases.

While donors are trying to broaden the instruments available to them in the so-called 'transition period' immediately following a peace agreement, NGOs find themselves looking for programmatic equivalents to these emerging instruments, if only because few complex emergencies lend themselves easily to quick-impact assistance, and because of issues related to mandate and scale. Relief NGOs, whose input might be valuable in post-conflict environments, are yet to develop the programmatic tools they need. This is not to say that NGOs have been negligent: agencies in both the DRC and southern Sudan have made commendable attempts to address this programmatic gap creatively. But this knowledge remains scattered and context-specific, and so is disjointed from the larger issue of post-conflict assistance. Perhaps the time has come for a review of existing practice and thinking, both for donors and NGOs, in the delivery of assistance in post-conflict areas.

Roger Persichino is desk officer for Action Against Hunger-USA.

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Microfinance in war-affected countries: challenging the myths

Why has microfinance such an undistinguished record in war-affected countries? Tamsin Wilson reports on an action research project that aimed to find some answers

All too often, microfinance projects in war-affected countries are marked by poor repayment discipline, confusion over grants and credit, the collapse of projects and little evidence of any sustained positive impact on the lives of beneficiaries. Insecurity, eroded social capital, high popu-

lation mobility, macro-economic instability and, as a consequence, the diminished ability of clients to make use of microfinance services certainly constrain these projects in war-affected countries. However, the pressure to disburse funds quickly, short time horizons and a lack of capacity

What is micro-finance?

Microfinance is any kind of financial service, such as savings, credit and money transfer, designed for poorer people who otherwise would not have access to financial services. It includes services provided by informal suppliers such as moneylenders and money collectors, semi-formal suppliers, such as NGOs, and formal suppliers, such as credit unions and banks.

also have an influence. In addition, a series of preconceptions about clients' wants and needs are used to justify non-adherence to the Donor Guidelines for Microfinance International Best Practice, the standard for donors and NGOs involved in microfinance in war-free countries.

The Post-conflict Microfinance Action Research Programme

This article is based on an action research project funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and managed by Concern Worldwide. The project consisted of qualitative field research in Angola, Mozambique, Rwanda and Cambodia in 2001; and the development of an innovative new microfinance organisation (MFO) in Rwanda, called Abazamukana. Abazamukana's first branch opened in Mugina, Gitarama, in August 2002. The area was badly affected by the genocide in 1994, and infrastructure remains poor; there is no electricity and only unsurfaced roads. Population density is 317 people per square kilometre, there is heavy dependence upon agriculture and ill-health is perceived to be the biggest risk to the household.

Preconceptions about microfinance

Preconceptions about the situation, needs and preferences of clients have influenced the design of microfinance projects in war-affected countries.

- Clients are too poor to pay interest as well as repaying the loan capital, so projects have low or no interest rates.
- Clients need a large lump sum to restart activities after a conflict, so loan sizes are large (for example, more than one-fifth of annual income).
- Clients prefer to use the loan for agricultural activities, so projects have long loan terms (six months to one year).
- Clients have often lost all their assets and have no collateral, so projects use group-based methodologies.
- Clients need micro-finance to kick-start their businesses, so projects are impermanent.
- The remit of the organisation is to assist the poorest households, so projects target the most vulnerable households.

Challenging assumptions

Each of these preconceptions is discussed below in relation to the research in 2001 and the experience of managing Abazamukana in Rwanda.

Interest rates

Respondents in the qualitative study prioritised convenience and accessibility over the price of microfinance services. In Sisophon, Cambodia, people preferred to pay more for moneylender credit than use the NGO Village Bank as it involved frequent meetings, delays in getting credit and discrimination against poorer, less reliable people. In Rwanda, loans cost as much as 100% per day immediately after the conflict of 1994. Today, a sack of beans borrowed from a shopkeeper two months before the harvest is repaid at harvest time with a bag of coffee worth five times the value of the beans.

Abazamukana's experience supports the qualitative research. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents to preliminary market research stated that they would pay 10% interest per month for an *individual* loan product. In the first six months of operations and without advertising, Abazamukana attracted 945 savings clients, of whom 440 also became individual borrowers. They pay 10% interest on loans of less than three months' duration for the first loan cycle, and 5% thereafter, and receive no interest on savings. Clients appreciate the convenient, rapid service, and state that cost is a lesser consideration.

Loan size

The research study found that poor people often took tiny loans from friends, traders and moneylenders. They gradually increased the amount they borrowed as their financial capital and business experience developed, and the environment improved.

Abazamukana experimented with loans as small as \$10 for very poor clients. Such small loans incrementing gradually are costly to supply, but Abazamukana's strategy is to create lifelong relationships with people who will become profitable and loyal clients. In contrast, some of Abazamukana's first clients who took large loans of \$50, but who failed to repay on time, have reported that they have lost respect among their peers or are in dispute with other members of the community as a result of their delinquency. Abazamukana's experience shows that loans equal to several months' household income can make clients vulnerable to external shocks, and unwittingly encourage further conflict.

Loan term

People choose not to invest in agriculture during and after armed conflict because of the poor economic and security situation. Khmer returnees sensed that the Khmer Rouge remained a significant threat and knew that agricultural land was seeded with landmines; instead of agriculture, they chose to trade or to process natural products such as timber. Such short-term measures are popular because they can be rapidly modified. Moneylenders, who provide loans for as little as half a day, often support these activities.

The situation has stabilised for Abazamukana's target group, which now does a mix of short-term (trade and agro-processing) and long-term (agriculture) activities that require investment. However, agriculture loans with much of the repayment made at the very end of a long

loan cycle after the crop has been harvested are risky for the client and the MFO. Abazamukana chooses to offer a short-term loan product of up to three months, and also a savings product, both of which can indirectly support agriculture.

Group-based methodologies

The research study recorded numerous complaints about time 'wasted' in group meetings; the exclusion of the very poor because the group did not trust them; inheritance of other people's problems as soon as one joined a group; and a slow and cumbersome process of approving loans in weekly or monthly meetings.

Rwandans in rural areas were coerced into groups to facilitate the genocide of 1994, and there is understandable ambivalence about involuntary group activity. Abazamukana thus decided to offer individual products, using a combination of savings, a personal guarantee and a rule that a new loan cannot be issued if an applicant's neighbours are late in repaying.

A strong relationship between credit agent and borrower and easy access to future loans are also important.

Portfolio at Risk (the value of all loans outstanding that have one or more instalments past due), is currently 30%, which is 25% higher than the internationally accepted standard. However, this trend has been reversed with the introduction of more robust collateral.

Permanence and sustainability

The research showed that, when NGOs withdrew their support to a microfinance initiative, clients sometimes refused to repay the departing NGO. On other occasions, weak community-based organisations collapsed within a few years. Consequently, MFOs are reluctant to move into areas where relief and rehabilitation organisations have been unable to recover loans, or where loans turned into grants when it was hard to establish repayment discipline.

Some of Abazamukana's clients believe that they need not repay their loans because, like the NGOs that went before it, Abazamukana will soon be gone. Others are encouraging friends and neighbours not to repay 'American money'. Abazamukana is developing a marketing campaign to counter these perceptions. The organisation has achieved 15% operational self-sufficiency in nine months, which is acceptable given the difficult environment.

Target group

The research study showed that, immediately after conflict, even very poor people often choose to put aside a few cents a week. In Rwanda, people saved tiny amounts with friends and relatives to create a small lump sum for business. In Cambodia, poor people borrowed small amounts from moneylenders for a short period and repaid frequently – sometimes several times a day.



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Chong Kok, Cambodia: Van Hour used a loan from the Concern 'bank' to set up a shop for her disabled daughter

In Rwanda, people who are not economically active rely upon assistance from friends and neighbours, the church and NGOs. Some do not have the capacity to set aside even a few cents a week, and consequently microfinance is unlikely to be of benefit to them and they should not be allowed to take out loans. There is a widely-held belief among Abazamukana's clients that loans are for the poor, and savings for the rich, who have spare cash. However, whether clients save to create a lump sum or save after they have borrowed a lump sum (i.e., to repay a loan), they will still have to save.

Preconceptions and best practice

The results of this action research project challenge assumptions about the kinds of microfinance services preferred and needed by poorer people affected by armed conflict. Columns two and three of the table compare preconceptions with the wants and needs established by the research. Two conclusions emerge: that people's wants and needs are often diametrically opposed to what they are imagined to be; and they closely correspond to the Donor Guidelines for Microfinance International Best Practice, which are summarised in column four.

Conclusions

In trying to reach the poor in war-affected areas, the common preconceptions of NGOs have sometimes helped to create MFOs and credit projects that are in practice unattractive and unhelpful. Although traumatised, economically vulnerable, dislocated from society and operating in insecure environments, war-affected people still want permanent, convenient and accessible microfinance services – even if these are more expensive. They can make use of smaller, short-term loans, and often prefer individual products to group-guaranteed ones. The only requirement is that clients can put aside at least a few cents a week.

Table 1: Micro-finance: preconceptions, wants and needs

Design features	Preconceptions	People's actual wants and needs	Best practice
Low or no interest	Clients are too poor to pay interest as well as repaying the loan capital	High interest rates (that can cover the cost of lending) will be paid in return for a genuinely convenient and accessible service	Loans should be priced appropriately so that rates are sufficient to eventually cover the full costs of efficient lending on a sustainable basis (after a reasonable start-up period)
Large loan size	Clients need a large lump sum to restart activities	Tiny loans and savings are useful. Vulnerability is increased by borrowing larger amounts	For micro-level clients, institutions should offer quick, simple and convenient access to small, short-term loans that are renewed or increased based on repayment record
Long loan term	Clients prefer to use the loan for agricultural activities	Short-term loans suit short-term activities, common immediately after conflict. Later, short-term loans remain less risky for the client and the MFO	
Group-based methodologies	Clients have often lost all their assets during conflict and therefore have no collateral	Clients dislike the group guarantee mechanism and will pay more for an individual service with alternative collateral	Collateral substitutes (eg peer guarantees or repayment incentives) or alternative forms of collateral should be used to motivate repayment. Emphasis should be on character-based lending for smaller loans
Permanence and sustainability	Impermanent microfinance assists clients to kick-start their businesses and the local economy	Short-term interventions damage the microfinance market and probably offer no long-term benefit for clients	(No reference made to temporary interventions.) Organisations should steadily reduce dependence on subsidies in order to move towards financial sustainability
Target clients	Target clients must be the most vulnerable households	Loans and savings can be useful for the economically active poor. Those who are not economically active should not be allowed to take loans, but may be able to save	Focus on the poor. The service should be for low-income clients, especially clients lacking access to other financial institutions. The focus need not be exclusive, but it must entail a distinct commitment to reaching the poor

Two important conclusions should be drawn. First, in war-affected countries more rigorous and detailed market research needs to take place so that MFOs really understand the financial service needs of their clients. Second, the Donor Guidelines for Microfinance International Best Practice can and should be followed far more closely than they are at present.

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Rebuilding health services after conflict: lessons from East Timor and Afghanistan

Ronald Waldman reports on important new work assessing the reconstruction of the health system in East Timor and Afghanistan

The response of the public health community to international political emergencies has been the subject of a growing body of literature since the mid-1980s. Descriptions of the epidemiological characteristics of different emergency settings and narratives of the experiences of NGOs are, fortunately, beginning to appear with increasing frequency in a number of peer-reviewed public health and medical journals, as well as in other fora. In addition, since the heavily-criticised humanitarian effort in Goma in 1994, a number of projects seeking to establish professional standards, guidelines and recommendations for the conduct of emergency relief have emerged.

The same cannot be said for the transition from emergency relief to longer-term development, however. While there are a number of overviews of the subject, some quite comprehensive and keenly analytical, and a few sets of guidelines aimed at helping those working on the ground to avoid some of the many potential pitfalls of a post-conflict environment, there are few experience-based accounts of what it takes to rebuild a destroyed health system.

Filling the gap

A recently published monograph from the National Research Council of the National Academies (US) and the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University takes a giant step toward filling this gap.¹ It is an instructive, readable essay that discusses what went right, and what went wrong, with the attempts to rehabilitate the health system in East Timor after independence from Indonesia in May 2002. The authors, from the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), the World Bank and the international health authorities that ultimately became the fledgling Ministry of Health, present an honest, and at times self-critical, picture of both the strengths and weaknesses of the various actors, including international NGOs, bilateral donors, UN agencies and themselves.

The authors recognise and address the fact that, in all

¹ J. Tulloch J, F. Saadah, R. M. de Araujo, R. P. de Jesus, S. Lobo, I. Hemming, J. Nassim and I. Morris, *Initial Steps in Rebuilding the Health Sector in East Timor*, National Academies Press, Washington DC, 2003.

post-conflict settings, an important set of competing priorities must be resolved. National authorities, donors, NGOs and international agencies all have programmatic and institutional objectives. Perhaps the most important message is that pressure on donors to disburse funds as quickly as possible, frequently through international NGOs, and to achieve measurable results in the short term, should be resisted in order to achieve a full transition from international to national control; to enable adequate attention to capacity-building; and to ensure that efforts can be sustained when external funds begin to dwindle.



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An operation under way at Dili General Hospital, East Timor

Key recommendations

While the authors recognise that, at the time of writing, it was too early to pass judgment, they describe a series of successes and failures of process in an attempt to forge recommendations for the international community to apply in other, similar, circumstances. Specifically, they cite the following:

1. A sector-wide approach to planning should be adopted from the outset; individual donors' needs for specific, 'vertical' programming should be resisted.
2. The involvement of national authorities is more important than making the most rapid progress possible – the focus should always be on sustainability.
3. A full and professional assessment of the physical health infrastructure, as opposed to the rapid assessments of the health situation that are standard practice during the emergency phase, should be carried out by experts.
4. In order to achieve reasonably rapid results, compromises should be made, given the limited capacity of national authorities, in standards of quality, procurement procedures and mechanisms of financial accounting.

East Timor and Afghanistan compared

Since the independence of East Timor, a number of other post-conflict interventions have attracted the attention (and the money) of the donor and humanitarian communities. From Bosnia to Sierra Leone, Kosovo to Somalia, and Cambodia to Angola, different courses of action are being taken, for different reasons, and with different results.

The East Timor team found that a sector-wide approach was 'critical' to soliciting cooperation between all of the actors – UN agencies, NGOs and bilateral donors – throughout the course of the reconstruction effort. Rather than pursuing individual, 'vertical', projects, the East Timor Health Sector Rehabilitation and Development Program (HRSDP) developed district health plans. These represented a substantial reduction of the system that had existed prior to independence. While this was threatening to NGOs, which might be put out of business, and to health workers, who might not find jobs in the leaner

structure, the sum of the district plans constituted a more sustainable health system that could still meet at least the basic health needs of the population. Although no 'common basket' was established into which donors would contribute, an adequate level of donor coordination was achieved to ensure support to core programmes, and to minimise duplication.

In contrast, although development issues were not entirely neglected, the early thrust of health sector rehabilitation in Afghanistan following the conflict there in late 2001 came through vertical programmes. National immunisation days aimed at the eradication of polio and the interruption of measles transmission were highly successful. Spearheaded by UNICEF and WHO, with the cooperation of many of the NGOs operating in the health sector, these mobilised and motivated a previously near-dormant cadre of health personnel; showed a sceptical populace that the new government was intent on bringing essential health services to the most peripheral communities; and established an early record of success that was convincing to both donors and implementing agencies, including the then-rudimentary Ministry of Health. From a technical standpoint, these programmes helped to establish a health information system that functioned reasonably well, and was able to provide sorely-needed data on a number of essential health conditions and services.

East Timor and Afghanistan were different in many ways, and perhaps they cannot be compared directly, but they have at least one essential feature in common – health manpower is severely limited. This is true not only for implementation capacity – the ability to adequately staff health facilities, especially at the more peripheral levels of the system – but also for management capacity, which is particularly weak. More highly-trained health personnel, such as physicians and nurses, are in short supply, demand higher salaries from the civil service system than can readily be afforded, and are reluctant to serve in distant, rural communities. How can the international community, given these circumstances, ensure both adequate service provision and a rapid handover of

control of health services to national authorities? The World Bank, building on a scheme first supported by the Asian Development Bank in Cambodia, has been proposing an arrangement whereby international NGOs compete with each other in post-conflict settings for government contracts, under which they would be reimbursed in accordance with their performance. This has a number of potential advantages and disadvantages, summarised in an early analysis of the needs of the post-conflict Afghanistan health system carried out by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) in July 2002. In East Timor, the Division of Health Services, the first successor to the Interim Health Authority, rejected this scheme, for reasons that are not well explained in the *Initial Steps* monograph, other than saying that the decision was 'based on feedback from the field, of the support being provided at that time by NGOs and its cost'.

In Afghanistan, as in East Timor, the implementing role of international NGOs was discussed at length. A system of performance-based partnership agreements was instituted, whereby one or a consortium of NGOs could make proposals to the government to provide a relatively full range of health services throughout a province. Proposals were to be considered on a competitive basis, and the Ministry of Health would oversee the awards and the monitoring of NGO performance. The perceived benefits to the Ministry of Health are that rural areas would be adequately served, technical performance could be maintained at an acceptable level, and the number of civil servants for whom recurrent salaries would pose a considerable short- and medium-term burden would be limited.

Key players

The authors of the East Timor monograph are critical of the inability of the World Bank, the principal donor in that setting, to modify its usual procurement mechanisms in order to hasten the reconstruction process. (In fact, too much money may have been available in the early stages of the reconstruction programme, allowing NGOs to rehabilitate health facilities in some areas before the finalisation of district health plans. In some instances, these facilities would have been designated for closure in the streamlined health system.)

With regard to the NGOs, the authors found it difficult to make many declarative statements or recommendations because of the diversity of their organisational missions and their differing levels of competence. What they do say of the East Timor situation, if true, applies equally to Afghanistan and most other emergency settings. They observed that NGOs with expertise in responding to emergencies are frequently not equipped, both philosophically and technically, to work in post-conflict or developmental settings. In fact, the authors find little difference between the two:

the post-conflict aspect ... should not be exaggerated. This can be a convenient label for NGOs ... looking for a new niche ... to expand their role beyond emergencies (without necessarily changing their expertise) most of the problems facing the

health sector in East Timor were those facing developing countries in general.

The transition from emergency relief to a post-conflict stage and/or to development can be complicated. Some of the major donors have entirely separate (and poorly communicating) organisational units dealing with these settings. The passage of authority, and with it operational procedures and measures of accountability, is never as clear as one would like. From the NGO standpoint, minimum standards in disaster response, such as those laid out in the Sphere project, are increasingly used in programme planning, implementation and evaluation. But there are no minimum standards for post-conflict interventions, and there is a risk of the minimums for emergency relief becoming the mid-term targets. The extent to which this occurs is not known, but national authorities, the donor community, UN agencies and NGOs all need to be made more aware of the risks.

None of the authors' experiences in East Timor should be taken as prescriptions for how to rehabilitate health services in a post-conflict setting. Although different decisions were made in Afghanistan, it is far too soon to tell whether these courses of action will be beneficial in the long run. In any case, the recommendations of the monograph seem to flow logically from the East Timor experience, as it is described. Undoubtedly, in each post-conflict setting, there will be a range of options to be explored in regard to programme planning and problem solving. The health care needs of the population must be carefully balanced, and the way forward should be tailored to the characteristics of the setting.

Initial Steps concludes with a call for more documentation of post-conflict experiences. 'Unless experience is recorded and analyzed, changing the way various organizations do business, people will keep repeating the same mistakes and running into the same obstacles.' If this message is taken to heart, this monograph will have served an admirable purpose. But, in addition, it is a unique critical analysis, by those responsible for the field implementation of a post-conflict rehabilitation programme, of the diverse factors affecting both the successes and the failures of their work.

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Public Expenditure Management and humanitarian response

Karin Christiansen on a simple and practical measure to ease the transition from humanitarian assistance to developmental support after emergencies

This article outlines the familiar problems of ‘off-budget’ donor expenditure, and the impact of emergency response practice, on public expenditure systems. In particular, it looks at the benefits that could be had by thinking about Public Expenditure Management (PEM) when setting up humanitarian operations, so as to make them ‘budget compatible’ in the longer term, once the emergency phase has passed. The idea is not to subsume the humanitarian sector into development approaches: there are distinct functions and acknowledged roles for these different types of work. However, there are ways of building practical links between them that maintain the integrity of each, but from which both can benefit. This article sets out a way of ensuring that the financial issues around humanitarian work do not inhibit core government functions around public expenditure and budgets.

What is Public Expenditure Management?

The terms Public Expenditure Management (PEM) or Public Financial Management describe processes to do with drawing up and disbursing a national budget, particularly the allocation and expenditure of public resources, as well as the collection of these resources, through such things as taxation.

The off-budget problem

Many governments in low-income countries that are receiving large amounts of aid have no clear picture of how much is coming in, or where it is going, let alone what is or is not working. The vast majority of this donor expenditure is delivered through projects, some of which are on-budget, most of which are not. Partly for reasons of independence, impartiality and neutrality, humanitarian aid is largely delivered through ‘off-budget projects’.

Evaluations of ‘project aid’, including humanitarian assistance, have drawn the following main conclusions:¹

- Administrative costs are extremely high because of the multiplicity of different reporting and accounting requirements, including tied aid.
- Spending is inefficient because it is dictated by donors’ priorities and procurement arrangements, not local priorities or accurate needs assessments.
- Funding levels are extremely unpredictable, and there is a discrepancy between pledges, commitments and disbursements.
- State systems are undermined or unsupported through special staffing arrangements and parallel structures.

¹ This is adapted from Lawson et al. (2002) and van den Berg and Dabelstein (2003).

- Accountability mechanisms are designed to satisfy donors’ requirements, rather than those of domestic/beneficiary constituencies.
- Emphasis is placed on the micro and technical aspects of interventions, with a failure to engage in the macro issues, including at times the political or military aspects of a situation.
- It is difficult to sustain a positive impact beyond the short term, with high levels of reliance on donor funds.
- The delivery of assistance can encourage corruption, fraud and rent-seeking, even at the extreme the development of parallel economies and interests. Independence from government does not obviate these problems.
- Systems are absent by which to monitor and evaluate information in such a way as to feed back in real time and change practice. There is a lack of learning.

Getting ‘off-budget’ assistance ‘on-budget’, and trying to get donors and NGOs to develop systems that synchronise activities with government systems, has become a major challenge for governments (and donors). As projected systems become entrenched, so too do the incentives to remain separate, both for donors and for those involved in projects, within and outside of government. Bringing financial flows ‘on-budget’ becomes increasingly difficult. In turn, fiscal discipline is limited, policy-making remains ad hoc and driven by external resource flows, and it is difficult to set up any systematic planning and implementation across government. The longer this continues, the harder it is to change.

The idea

The suggestion that public expenditure issues need to be incorporated into humanitarian assistance seems counter-intuitive at first. The idea being put forward here is simple: all agencies should use a budget-compatible information-gathering format from the beginning of the flow of resources into a country. This is not the same as starting a ‘budget process’, nor does it imply a gain or loss of control by any party. Rather, it would facilitate the development of such a process in the future.

In practice this might mean:

1. Adapting a standard budget classification to include likely humanitarian activities. Ideally, this would be based on the budget structure previously used in the country. If the existing classifications are problematic, one could start with an International Monetary Fund (IMF) classification. It would probably require some revision and modification as events unfolded.
2. This way of classifying data could be used from the beginning of humanitarian operations as the standardised format in which all players present their activities.
3. The coordination mechanisms and structures that are set up in such situations would then have a standard-

Aid and Afghanistan

In 2002, \$5.2 billion was pledged to the reconstruction of Afghanistan: \$3.8bn as grants, and \$1.4bn as loans over between one and five years. Of this, \$2.1bn was committed in grants, and \$0.26bn in loans. By March 2003, around 88% had been disbursed. However, per capita these contributions are low compared to similar responses in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo.

Problems include:

- Most of the aid (84%) is not flowing through government structures or systems. Only 16% of the \$1.84bn of grant money disbursed since 2002 has gone through the government; most of the money coming into Afghanistan has gone to the UN and NGOs.
- The US is by far the largest single donor to the country. However, Washington's approach involves little or no interaction with government systems. This is almost certainly inhibiting the development of more effective prioritisation and resource allocation.
- Within the central government, there is a plethora of different systems. These include different authorities with overlapping or parallel responsibilities – the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Planning, the Ministry of Reconstruction and the Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority. There are also separate budgets for 'Ordinary' spending (salaries and running costs, for instance) and for 'Developmental' spending (on buildings, infrastructure and capital projects). This is a common distinction in such budgets; integrating the two, so that the implications of spending in one are taken into account in the other, is notoriously difficult. Within the 'Ordinary' budget, there are three further separate funds (the Afghanistan Interim Authority Fund, the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and the Law and Order Trust Fund). There is also a series of at least nominal 'on-budget' projects from donors such as the EU and the World Bank, which make up the entirety of the 'Developmental' budget, but in general have their own, additional accounting and decision-making systems.
- The pre-existing regional system based on simple ledger accounting procedure continues to function, more-or-less. This is largely running in parallel, and is not linked to the central budgeting system.
- There is a tension between 'bottom-up' budget development – where the budget is constructed by listing and aggregating largely donor-run projects – and budget development based on government classifications.
- There are 12 programmes within the budget; how these correspond to the 32 ministries is not entirely clear.

The government is attempting to introduce some coherence and draw together the various flows of resources into Afghanistan. However, now that these separate and competing approaches are all up and running, with their own momentum and politics behind them, this will be a struggle. The collection of aid data in budget-compatible formats as soon the resources started to flow would not have overcome all these problems. But it would have reduced the distortions being created, and accelerated the pace at which state systems could take over responsibility for meeting the needs of the Afghan people.

- ised format, which would greatly facilitate information collection and exchange between humanitarian actors. It could be seen as building on the work done by, for example, ReliefWeb, and could greatly assist reporting, accountability and learning. The choice of where to locate the responsibility for this function would probably have to depend on the situation. It would however be important to ensure that the gathering of such information does not bypass government.
4. It would probably be useful if development aid to support public expenditure management was also started up earlier than is currently the case. This would facilitate continuous and iterative liaison between the developing management structures and humanitarian actors, to make sure that this method of gathering and sharing 'resource data' is serving humanitarian relief operations effectively.
 5. To enable this, all actors need to have a clear understanding of the distinct principles and objectives of humanitarian aid and development assistance in order to protect their different purposes.
- Using budget-compatible information-sharing mechanisms within humanitarian relief operations should facilitate the move through the 'grey zone' before developmental aid flows emerge to replace relief.
 - The information that would be in this 'budget' is being collected and shared anyway, so why not use something standardised that will help for the longer term too?
 - Standardising classifications of information would make it much easier to work out what different actors are doing, avoid duplication of efforts and so deploy resources more effectively.
 - Such an approach would provide a potentially more 'neutral' vehicle for information on expenditure. This could be of particular value in contested environments and situations of conflict. Relief operations cannot afford to 'avoid' the national government once that government possesses even a vague sense of legitimacy. National government systems need to be part of the solution to humanitarian problems, even in the short term. Such an approach would provide a transparent and neutral tool for starting up such collaboration, and would help to reduce co-option and the political manipulation of funds.
 - The lack of capacity or engagement of crisis or post-conflict states is frequently either the direct cause of a

Why is this important for humanitarian actors?

This kind of approach would offer several benefits for humanitarian actors.

humanitarian crisis, or results in a failure to respond and mitigate that crisis. While there is a consensus that the state is the only long-term mechanism for fulfilling humanitarian needs and obligations, state-building needs also to be seen as a crucial short-term activity. This is partly because the costs of badly coordinated, inefficient humanitarian aid delivery are high, and also because there are likely to be important lost opportunities in terms of better governance and domestic accountability. The benefits of incorporating financial information and developing budget-compatible systems early in the response to a crisis are likely to be high.

- This problem would seem to be more acute in post-conflict situations in more developed states, like Iraq or Bosnia. The level of urbanisation, technology and complexity required to get water, sanitation, food supply and health systems up and running means that ‘reviving’ such systems is not only the aim of a longer-term developmental process, but also a short-term humanitarian necessity.

Karin Christiansen is a researcher in the Centre for Aid and Public Expenditure (CAPE) in the Poverty and Public Policy Group (PPPG) at ODI. The ideas in this article have been developed in consultation with members of the Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI. Thoughts and

comments on the practicability of such an approach by those with experience of operating in these environments would be greatly welcome, as would any expressions of interest in taking the approach forward. Please contact Karin at k.christiansen@odi.org.uk.

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HIV/AIDS: what are the implications for humanitarian action?

HPG is currently engaged in a study on HIV/AIDS and humanitarian action. The scope of the study is outlined below. Anyone interested in more details about this piece of work should contact Paul Harvey (paul.harvey@odi.org.uk). We would welcome comments on the approach and any literature you could send us that might not be publicly available. This could include reports, assessments, proposals, policy guidelines or evaluations that address the issue of HIV/AIDS and humanitarian programming.

The study

The current humanitarian crisis in southern Africa has highlighted the complex interactions between food insecurity, famine (or the threat of it), humanitarian action and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. James Morris, the UN Special Envoy, argues that ‘the HIV/AIDS situation in Southern Africa is challenging the paradigm of humanitarian assistance’. Analysts such as Alex de Waal and Alan Whiteside warn that the epidemic may lead to ‘new variant famine’, characterised by ‘heightened vulnerability, a breakdown in coping strategies, rapid descent into starvation and inability to recover’. The extent, however, to which the humanitarian system is actually changing in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic remains unclear, both in terms of concrete action now, and in terms of adapting its ways of working in future.

This study will review the existing literature on AIDS, food security and famine. It will map how the humanitarian system is dealing with the issue of HIV/AIDS in the southern Africa crisis, and will consider how aid agencies should deal with the HIV/AIDS epidemic in future crises. It will have two main objectives:

- To provide humanitarian practitioners and policy-makers with a critical review of existing literature on HIV/AIDS and food security and a framework for understanding the interactions between HIV/AIDS, food security and famine.
- To summarise and disseminate the lessons learnt by the humanitarian community from the crisis in southern Africa, in dealing with the links between HIV/AIDS and acute food insecurity, and suggest possible avenues for future good practice.

The project will tackle key conceptual issues raised by the southern Africa crisis, such as definitions of famine and the impact of HIV/AIDS on triggering crises and recovering from them. It will also examine where humanitarian assistance should be situated in the overall response to the epidemic.

The focus of the second objective will be on specific, practical findings and recommendations for humanitarian actors. What areas need to be developed in applying an ‘HIV lens’ to humanitarian programming? This will encompass questions around how to incorporate AIDS issues in early warning, assessment and targeting; how food and nutrition programmes should adapt; and whether broader responses are needed, encompassing other sectors.

Geographic information systems in food security and demining programmes

Geographic information systems are becoming increasingly widespread as a tool for guiding decision-making in relief interventions. Here, Kerry Abbott explains their value in food security and demining programmes

Geographic information systems (GIS) are computer-generated maps, built up with layers of information. The key components of a basic geographic database are land use, infrastructure and topography, on top of which information on other features, such as population movements, settlement patterns and accessibility, may also be layered.

Food security

The first step in approaching a GIS solution is to consider what information is needed. In food security, the starting-point is a geographical map of the region, indicating such features as slope, vegetation, water sources and international boundaries. Data relating to land use, rainfall, soil type, cultivation, settlements/population patterns and transport routes are then added. On the top layer, more precise information relates to such features as conflict areas or minefields. All of this can be called up as a specific image, or superimposed so that the resultant map reveals areas of high risk. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show a study of accessible ground water sources and land use which would be superimposed digitally.

Land use and cultivation patterns form the initial base of information necessary for devising a food security programme. However, food insecurity is a complex issue, and the critical aspects may not be the most readily apparent. Under-nutrition, for example, may be a problem of production or of access. Low productivity may derive from weather conditions, inadequate supplies for crops or livestock or policy decisions. Decreased income and lack of alternative employment may be a seasonal disturbance or a degradation of the environment. GIS mapping enables many other layers of data to be included for a more sophisticated analysis of the interrelationship of issues such as these.

GIS is particularly effective at revealing relationships between climate, meteorological conditions, water balance and crop forecasts. Data on early warning systems can be found on many internet sites, including the FAO's Global Information and Early Warning Systems (GIEWS) at www.fao.org/giews, and USAID's Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) at www.fews.net. The European Commission's Joint Research Centre provides research on

Figure 1: A typical map showing accessible water sources

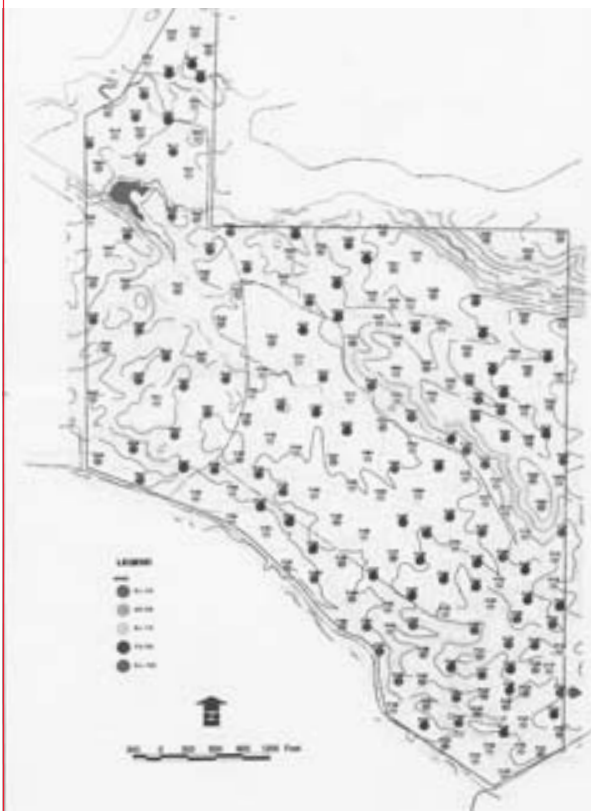
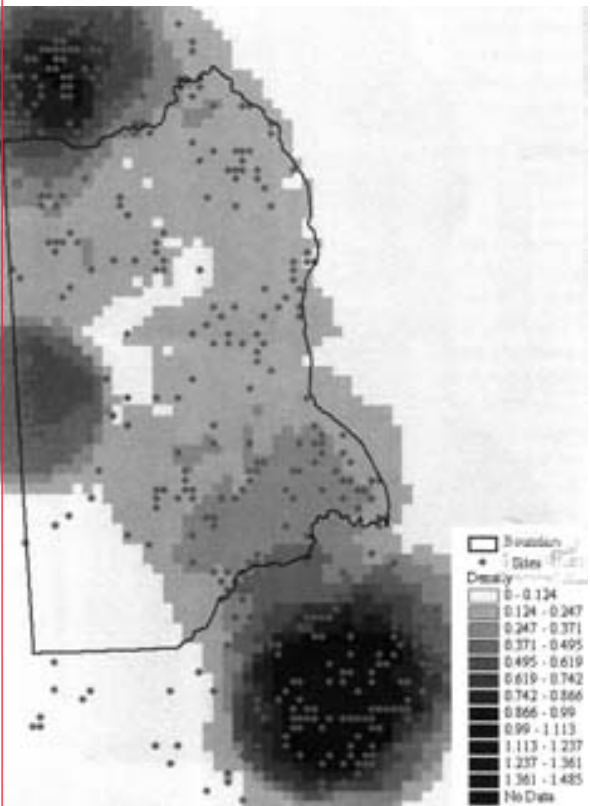


Figure 2: A typical map showing land use



Figure 3: A typical map showing landmine density

GIS applications in humanitarian relief, including the work of EURISY (www.eurisy.assoc.fr).

Demining

Minefields pose serious problems in more than 65 countries. In Afghanistan, for instance, an estimated 25% of agricultural land and 66% of grazing land is mined. Identifying fields so that they can be clearly marked, fenced off or cleared is thus another important use for GIS mapping, especially when linked to land reclamation. Important questions here may include: which areas or sites have strategic significance?; where has land been disturbed?; where do factional territorial divisions lie? The purpose of laying mines may also be important: is it defensive, for sabotage, or to terrorise a civilian population?

High-resolution satellite imagery from the internet (IKONOS, IRS) provides basic topological and statistical data for an initial framework for analysis. Key visual clues from satellite images include linear 'ploughshare' patterns across patches of terrain, trenches, artificial embankments, fencing (especially along borders), evidence of military activity and seasonal variations in land use. However, satellite imagery and remote sensing tend to overestimate the extent of mined areas. Alternative survey methods must then be used to refine initial assessments. For studies on a smaller or very local scale, photos from aerial surveys are an alternative source. New technologies including radar and 3-D imaging for local surveying are being tested and refined. Ground surveys around the perimeter of the suspected minefield can then clarify or correct the maps compiled.

A mine action information system would need to include information on the minefields themselves (confirmed and suspected) and the local population, and thematic maps including socio-economic data and resources, with precise locations using the global positioning system (GPS). As minefields are of interest to the military, changes throughout the course of a conflict are often monitored and recorded, including reports from government defence agencies, refugees and other parties.

When addressing food security in regions where mines are a risk factor, a combination of data can be digitised and compared to coordinate demining programmes with food security plans. This gives a broad view of a region's status, and helps to fine-tune and prioritise interventions. The more data that is added, the greater potential use the final map will have, and the more thorough the decision-making process. In Figure 3, if this land use map were applied to demining, the darkly shaded patches would indicate minefield areas of greater density. The lighter shaded areas therefore would indicate the first choice for land clearance if the issue is ease and rapidity. If other data, for instance field of choices would gradually narrow to the areas where clearing mines would have the greatest benefit in terms of access to productive land.

Data collection and implementation

The multiplicity of auxiliary data sources and the number of agencies working in the field make coordination a key obstacle to the effective use of GIS in food security and demining. Experience in Mozambique and Afghanistan has indicated that much information derived from local surveys is incomplete, inaccurate and not based on compatible standards. In conflict regions, it is also difficult to gain uniform access for thorough and timely mapping.

Since humanitarian interventions involve multi-sectoral assistance, it is possible to divide data collection up according to sectors, and assign these surveys to agencies primarily concerned with these sectors. A degree of overlap provides a control measure for assessing the accuracy of data inputs. Thus, infrastructure surveys include and overlap with water/sanitation surveys, and agricultural surveys include infrastructure and irrigation systems. Once an effort is made to corroborate satellite maps with data on the ground, the human factor can either introduce distortions or enhance precision. Developing a coordinated methodology is essential in accurate data collection for mapping.

Conclusions

Because accurate GIS mapping can require a vast array of data, often from official or technical sources not readily available in developing countries, there are concerns that it is not suitable for rapid assessments or for participatory methods. In fact, this is not necessarily so: maps available in the public domain on the internet provide much general information through aerial and satellite imagery. In matters relating to particular issues, like risk and resource mapping for food security or demining, local surveys are essential. These introduce potential inaccuracy due to variations in

methodology, access, thoroughness and professional standards. But with adequate data input, GIS can reveal relationships not easily discerned through other survey methods, such as the link between the probability of crop failure and a community's risk of food shortages.

Food security and demining are both linked to issues of land use, and are therefore ideal fields for the use of geographical information systems. Identifying land suitable for cultivation is one of the principal benefits of applying GIS in demining strategies. ESRI produces some of the leading software in GIS applications for resource conservation, urban planning, public health and disaster management. The coupling of satellite maps with local surveys provides an extremely useful framework for crafting a basic GIS of a site for projected humanitarian intervention. As more raw data are filled in to create new layers, the GIS model can be adapted and updated to provide information across many sectors, leading not only to more precise analysis, but also to better-coordinated programmes.

Kerry Abbott is Director, Agency for Relief and Development, Jerusalem.

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The road to good donorship: the UK's humanitarian assistance

The UK government has a significant influence over the shape of the international humanitarian system, both as a source of funds and as a policy-maker. In this article, part of our series looking at donor governments' policies, Adele Harmer assesses the key features and future vision of the UK's humanitarian aid programme

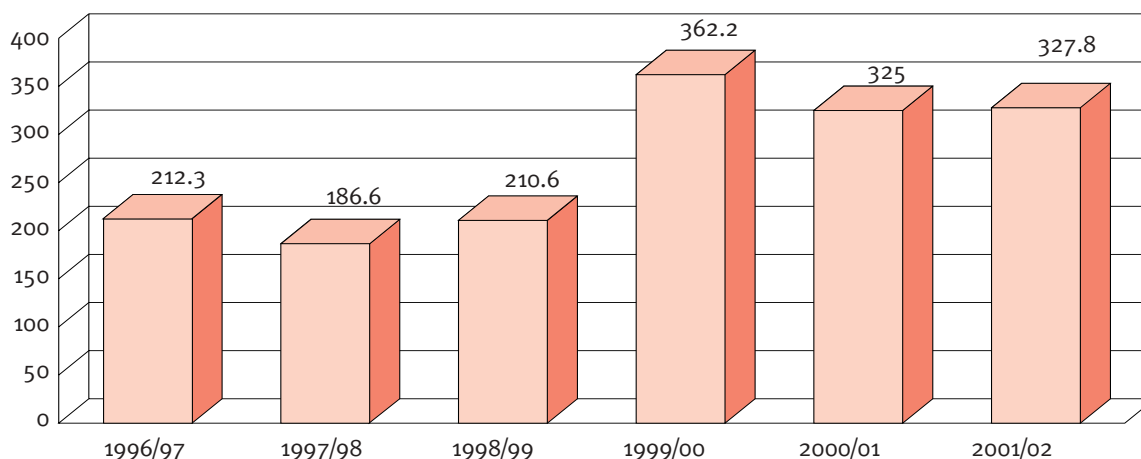
The UK is the world's second-largest bilateral donor of official humanitarian assistance (in real terms), after the US. In 2001, the UK allocated \$411 million to humanitarian aid, 10% of the global total and 9% of the country's overall aid budget.

The Department for International Development (DFID) is the government department responsible for the UK's devel-

opment and relief aid. DFID was established as a separate department in 1997; prior to that, the aid programme had been the responsibility of the Overseas Development Administration, part of the British Foreign Office.

DFID responds to a wide range of emergencies. The nature and scale of these responses can vary significantly in response to the UK's wider foreign and domestic

Figure 1: The UK's official humanitarian assistance (£m)



policies. In the past five years, the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo have featured significantly. Likewise, the British overseas territory of Montserrat, devastated by a volcanic eruption in 1995, has been one of the top-ten recipients of UK humanitarian assistance for five of the past six years. Afghanistan received £50m in 2001/02, five times the assistance allocated to the second-largest recipient, Ethiopia. In 2003, DFID has earmarked £210m to Iraq, nearly double its total humanitarian aid budget in 2001.

DFID has increasingly responded to needs created or exacerbated by conflict, or from a combination of conflict and 'natural' causes. Only eight of the 26 highest recipient countries of humanitarian assistance between 1996/7 and 2000/01 were solely 'natural' disasters. In terms of the type of assistance provided, DFID allocates funds across a diverse set of sectors, including assistance to improve humanitarian information flows and coordination mechanisms.

Disbursement channels

DFID disburses its funds through ECHO, UN agencies, the Red Cross Movement and NGOs, and through the UK government's own civilian and military channels. Between 20% and 25% of DFID's humanitarian assistance goes through ECHO; the UK is the largest donor to the IFRC, the second-largest to the ICRC and also provides a large share of OCHA's income. In 2001, DFID spent \$199m through NGOs, second only to ECHO. While a consistent supporter of UNHCR and WFP, DFID is not a major donor of either.

The policy framework

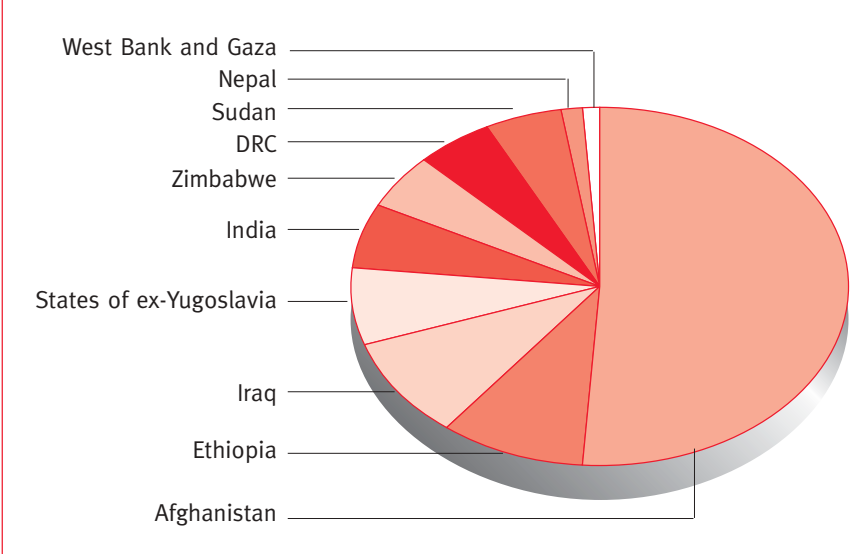
DFID's humanitarian policy is contained in the policy document *Conflict Reduction and Humanitarian Assistance*, released in 1999. The statement affirmed DFID's commitment to ten principles, first outlined in the UK's White Paper on International Development in 1997, including a commitment to:

- uphold international and human rights laws and conventions;
- be impartial, relieving suffering without discrimination, and prioritising the most urgent need;
- assess needs and have a clear framework of standards and accountability; and
- encourage the participation of those affected by crisis to help them find long-term solutions.

The policy outlined the purpose of DFID's humanitarian assistance:

- to save lives and relieve suffering;
- to hasten recovery, and protect and rebuild livelihoods

Figure 2: Top-ten recipients, 2001–2002 (£m)



- and communities; and
- to reduce risks and vulnerability.

No further policy directives have been produced since 1999, though a new statement is expected in 2003–2004.

Organisation

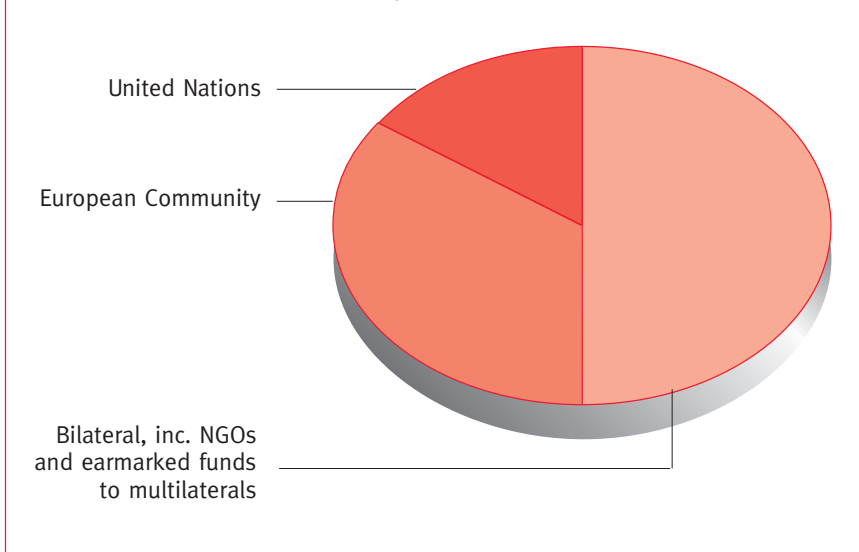
Within DFID, conflict and humanitarian policy issues, including emergencies and disasters, are handled by the Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department (CHAD). Over 40 full-time staff work in CHAD. CHAD is made up of five teams: Global Institutions, Humanitarian Response, Conflict and Security Policy, Arms Export Control and CHAD Operations (CHAD OT). CHAD OT supports CHAD's management of its rapid-onset assistance programmes, provides humanitarian advice and logistics support and undertakes monitoring and evaluation activities. There are an additional 26 staff working in CHAD OT under contract to DFID through Crown Agents.

The co-location of conflict policy and humanitarian policy meant that CHAD was able to influence not only the provision of relief, but also the shape of the UK's political response to conflict. CHAD is located in the International Division, under the Director-General, Policy and International. There are also three Geographic Divisions, which have a substantial role in shaping DFID's humanitarian response. These are under the Director-General, Regional Programmes.

The Humanitarian Response team has formal responsibility for developing and overseeing the implementation of humanitarian policy throughout DFID. There is no formal mechanism for managing this responsibility, and consultation is done on an ad hoc basis. The division between policy and programming has never been clear, and responsibility for formulating a strategy on a particular emergency differs according to the nature and location of the crisis.

In principle, CHAD is responsible for managing rapid-onset

Figure 3: Humanitarian assistance by channel, 2001–2002



also manages DFID's vehicles, equipment and relief systems; provides training for other international agencies, including OCHA, in such things as logistics and humanitarian information systems; and has also assumed responsibilities for disaster preparedness, contingency planning and civil–military cooperation. Since 1995, the team has grown from five to 26 full-time members, plus a pool of specialists brought in on short- and medium-term contracts. Lines of responsibility between civil servants and contract staff have not always been clear.

Governing relations with humanitarian partners

assistance programmes, while the regional desks lead on slow-onset, recurrent natural disasters and complex political emergencies. Where no bilateral programme or desk exists, or when requested to do so by a desk, CHAD also manages natural disasters and complex emergencies. CHAD has responsibility for programme assistance to North Korea, Burma and the Northern Caucasus, for instance. There are no guidelines to determine when and how CHAD will be involved, nor are there formal guidelines for the handover of rapid-onset disaster programmes to the relevant desk. CHAD's involvement usually lasts for under six months, but decisions about duration would seem to be based on comparative capacity and technical skills. For example, in responding to the slow-onset crisis in Southern Africa in 2002/03, the Southern Africa department and CHAD developed a joint strategy, with 11 CHAD Operations staff deployed to the region to provide advice to the country teams. For the response to the situation in Iraq, three units were established (humanitarian response, planning for long-term reconstruction, and briefing and information) all reporting to the head of the Middle East and North Africa Department.

The flexible division of labour within DFID regarding humanitarian policy and programming suits environments that are invariably dynamic, fluid and difficult to predict. However, this flexibility has also created a degree of confusion outside of DFID, in particular for partner organisations. DFID does not produce strategy papers for countries that are primarily recipients of humanitarian assistance, and there is thus no single document articulating DFID's aims, objectives and strategy in this field.

Operational capacity

Like other major donors such as USAID and ECHO, DFID has expanded its capacity to deploy staff at field level, and occasionally to involve itself directly in logistics and service provision. This has been achieved largely through a private firm (Crown Agents) working under contract to DFID. CHAD OT provides 24-hour cover for emergency response and undertakes needs assessment and analysis of conditions. It

DFID has invested considerable time and resources to the reform of international organisations' responses to humanitarian crises. This is in line with the approach outlined in government White Papers, in which the Department has sought to achieve its objectives not simply by providing assistance, but also by seeking to influence global policy. These goals have been pursued by a range of mechanisms, including participation in global governance structures, such as the Humanitarian Aid Committee (HAC) of ECHO; active participation in donor groups, including the Friends of OCHA, the Technical Advisory Group of the IFRC, and the Donor Support Group of the ICRC; and through participation in the Montreux process and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

DFID has also established three-year Institutional Strategy Papers (ISPs) for all international humanitarian organisations, except ECHO. ISPs set out how DFID aims to contribute to achieving its White Paper objectives in partnership with each of the institutions concerned. ISPs allow for more predictable funding, and there is evidence that they have increased the level of trust between DFID and its partner agencies; this is reflected in increases in overall funding. However, there are also significant transaction costs for the recipient, and concerns that these documents may reflect DFID's own priorities, rather than those of the recipient.

DFID's emergency funds are provided to NGOs through 'accountable grants', and are based on individual contracts. Over the last decade, contractual relations and management procedures have become increasingly complex. However, NGOs' obligations are considered more straightforward and flexible than those with other donors. DFID has developed core funding arrangements called Partnership Programme Agreements (PPAs) for some of the NGOs they fund. These are intended to last for between three and five years, and set out how NGOs and DFID will work together to meet a set of agreed outcomes. Some of these agreements, such as those for Oxfam and Christian Aid, include specific goals for the humanitarian and emergency sector.

Future directions

The UK government's future approach to humanitarian action will be influenced by two important international initiatives currently engaging the humanitarian community's interest. The first, the Good Humanitarian Donorship meeting, held in Stockholm in June 2003, agreed on objectives for, and the definition of, humanitarian action; and also general principles and good practice in the financing, management and accountability of humanitarian response. The other, the Humanitarian Financing Working Programme, a process initiated by a group of donors working with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), is looking at the allocation of official humanitarian assistance and its relationship to humanitarian need. The process has included commissioning four extensive studies: on needs assessments; on donor behaviour; on quantifying and qualifying humanitarian aid flows; and on the implications for the UN system. DFID has made clear that the best practice identified by the study and the broader agenda of establishing principles for good donorship will set the frame for a new humanitarian policy statement.

Adele Harmer is a Research Officer in the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI.

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According to need?

Needs assessment and decision-making in the humanitarian sector

HPG Report 15

James Darcy, Charles-Antoine Hofmann
Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI

This report reflects the results of a year-long study on the link between needs assessment and decision-making in the humanitarian sector. The aim of the study was to explore ways in which responses by the international humanitarian system might be made more consistently proportionate and appropriate to the needs of those affected by disaster and conflict. It did this through a critical examination of current practice in needs assessment and decision-making, looking at key elements of the system (the UN and non-governmental agencies, as well as governmental donors), and at how the system functioned as a whole. The study found more consistent needs-based responses depended on:

- (i) the definitions of 'need', 'crisis' and 'risk' that were adopted, and the criteria by which proportionality and appropriateness of response are judged;
- (ii) the ability in practice to assess situations against those criteria; and
- (iii) the extent to which decision-making, including resource mobilisation and allocation, is based on evidence about needs.

The report considers each of these questions in turn, and the links between them.

A summary report is available at the HPG website: www.odi.org.uk/hpg/paper/Report15summary.pdf

The full report and a Briefing Paper are forthcoming

Some thoughts on the crisis in Iraq

As the passions aroused by the second Gulf war begin to fade and the media frenzy subsides, François Grünewald reflects on some of the lessons of the crisis

In the aftermath of the war in Iraq, airlifts bringing in humanitarian assistance have begun, in some cases backed by the considerable resources released by the US, the European Commission and EU member states. UN agencies, NGOs and 'specialists in reconstruction' have begun to flood in. Meanwhile, security remains precarious, and Iraqis are becoming increasingly frustrated. While it is perhaps too early fully to take stock, this article offers some immediate thoughts on the war and its aftermath.

The humanitarian context

At one time, Iraq's economy flourished, based on huge and cheap-to-exploit oil reserves. The war with Iran, which began in the early 1980s, marked the start of its decline; substantial portions of the country's resources were channelled into the war effort, and a generation of young men were sent to their deaths. Then came the invasion of Kuwait and the first Gulf war, followed by the blockade. Deprived of a normal economy, the country and its people were *de facto* dependent on outside help; meanwhile, an underground, mafia-like economy flourished.

Between 1991 and 2002, the European Commission was Iraq's largest international donor. That said, its efforts constituted no more than a fraction of the resources available via the UN's 'oil for food' programme. The programme was the logical consequence of Security Council Resolution 661, approved on 6 August 1990, which established sanctions and a trade embargo against Iraq. While a UN mission had pointed out as far back as 1991 the risk that people's livelihoods would be damaged by sanctions, it took fully five years before the programme was established.

The cumbersome procedures of the Sanctions Committee, along with those of Saddam Hussein's regime, had a serious impact on the delivery of aid. The situation in what was once one of the heartlands of civilisation deteriorated dramatically. Physical hardship was accompanied by violations of human rights, reprisals and torture. Nevertheless, an unprecedented level of financial resources was mobilised for the benefit of the Iraqi people. By the end of December 2002, over \$9.5 billion had been generated by the sale of Iraqi oil. The Iraqi government itself set up programmes in the 15 governorates of the centre and south of the country, under the



A Red Cross instructor conducts mine-awareness activities with schoolchildren

©CRC/John Sahiberg

supervision of nine UN agencies. In the three Kurdish governorates in the north, UN agencies implemented programmes directly in the name of the Iraqi government – leading to a strange situation whereby the UN was working for people in one area on behalf of their enemy in another.

The refugee crisis that didn't happen

When the bombing started in March 2003, many aid programmes were suspended, and refugee camps were hastily set up in neighbouring countries in expectation of a mass departure of Iraqis. The camps remained empty; no one listened to those who were saying, rightly as it turned out, that such a mass flight was the least probable scenario. This is doubly surprising given other, recent cases of disasters that didn't happen. International actors were expecting Kosovar refugees in Albania to have to endure a harsh winter in 1999–2000, but against all expectations the Kosovars returned to their homes in less than a month, from mid-June 1999. Mountains of tents and equipment were piled up in countries surrounding Afghanistan in preparation for another great exodus of Afghans, which again turned out to be a disaster that did not happen.

Aid and the aftermath of war

Although there was no major refugee crisis, humanitarian agencies still face difficult tasks, and the humanitarian operation will not be cheap. Once the war ended, the race

began as usual, as NGOs and UN agencies, on stand-by for months in Cyprus, flooded in – but to do what, to meet what needs, with what comparative advantage, and what expertise? Iraq had a sophisticated economic infrastructure, and high-quality human resources are available. As often happens, in the second week after the crisis the nature of needs changed and they became more complex. The ‘pseudo-simplicity’ of humanitarian emergencies has given way to the ‘complex issues’ of reconstruction, such as re-establishing water supplies, restoring electricity production and getting hospitals going again. The country has a tradition of commerce and, even before the war, used to buy in a large proportion of its food. How is access to food to be secured in an economy that has been paralysed by the sanctions just lifted, and by the direct consequences of two very destructive conflicts?

We must also consider the issue of anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance. These are found all along the old front line with Iran, not to mention mines laid by the various Kurdish groups on the approaches to the Turkish border and as a protective measure against possible confrontation with the Iraqi army. There are also the mines inherited from the first Gulf war, together with hundreds of thousands of shells, grenades and other ordnance, launched and forgotten by one side or the other. New technologies were deployed, far exceeding the skills and probably the equipment of grassroots deminers. Decontaminating the country will take years, and the Americans know this full well. In Laos and Vietnam, people are still dying every week, blown up by mines or cluster bombs.

The challenges of reconstruction are immense, not least because Iraq is so diverse. From the burning sands of the Kuwaiti frontier to the marshes between the Tigris and Euphrates and the mountains of Kurdistan, Iraq has a multitude of cultures; diverse forms of interaction between urban and rural areas and between nomadic and sedentary populations; and economic systems affected in very different ways by the sanctions. Subtle approaches need to be worked out in place of a uniform, homogeneous perspective.

Aid, politics and the international community

Alongside the humanitarian challenge lies the political one. As a consequence of the fraught environment in which the US and the UK went to war, serious differences between the key donors persist. In Europe, there was consensus on the need for humanitarian assistance. The reaction was immediate: ECHO released 21 million euros from its normal budget, and obtained a budget extension of 79m euros from the European Commission. Yet the differences between the main European states over the justification for the war threaten to hamper the coordination of assistance between the Commission and individual member states. Should this coordination fail, Europe risks further ridicule.

Meanwhile, the establishment of the Office for Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction, run by an American official, has highlighted the role of humanitarian aid and the relationship between NGOs and military and political power in this kind of environment. During an evaluation mission to Afghanistan in January–February 2003, I was told that the civilian and military operations launched by the US military through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) were a ‘test and rehearsal before Iraq’. At the time, the proceedings within the Security Council over Iraq had only just begun. The situation is in fact unprecedented: the US and its coalition allies have acknowledged their status as an occupying power as defined in the fourth Geneva Convention, and have announced that they accept the corresponding responsibilities. Given this, what dialogue will they be prepared to hold with the rest of the world and, especially, with the UN and Europe?

It is not just Iraq that needs rebuilding: international relations – and the UN in particular – need it too. It is difficult to imagine that it will be possible to reunite a divided UN on the basis of negotiations around rehabilitation programmes in Iraq. We find ourselves in a situation where the possibility of action outside of, parallel to or in opposition to the Security Council hangs over us like the sword of Damocles, permanently threatening diplomatic mechanisms inherited from the years after the Second World War. What will happen if no weapons of mass destruction are found? Resolution 687, passed on 3 April 1991, which contributed towards the tightening of sanctions, specifically refers to the destruction of these weapons. Can the embargo be lifted without reference to the issue of disarmament? Can the UN secure a meaningful role in the political and reconstruction processes? These questions have been central to the political agenda, and a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ has been negotiated. Yet the self-assigned prominent role of the coalition will continue to contaminate the humanitarian debate, while the issue of the whereabouts of the weapons of mass destruction will make the atmosphere of international relations pernicious for some time to come.

As the dust settles, we can only hope that, of all the casualties of these past months, diplomacy and humanitarian action as we know it are spared lasting harm. We can only hope too that the Americans have had time to reflect on the words of a strategist they know well. General Giap, the North Vietnamese Defence Minister, often used to say that it was easier to win the war than to win the peace. The Iraqi kaleidoscope, with its many religious, ethnic and political facets, could well prove him right.

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Writing for HPN

The Humanitarian Practice Network provides an opportunity for people to share knowledge and experience. All the articles and papers published by HPN are written by its members, readers or others working with national and international NGOs, UN agencies, governments and donor institutions, or by academics and independent consultants.

HPN is pleased to consider articles and papers for publication submitted by anyone involved in some way in humanitarian action. If you have knowledge and experience to share but do not consider yourself a 'writer', don't worry! It is your ideas that are important – HPN has experienced editorial staff to help you to communicate them.

Humanitarian Exchange

Published three times a year, the HPN magazine contains articles on practical experience, institutional initiatives and policy developments. Each issue also has a special feature of articles on a particular theme or country/region. Articles are about 2,000 words long. We prefer them to be submitted in English, but can also accept drafts in other languages. Correspondence with authors is, however, in English.

Network Papers

Network Papers examine specific issues or experiences in the humanitarian field. Between four and six are published each year. They are about 15,000 words long. Again, we prefer them to be submitted in English, but can also accept drafts in other languages. A summary is required in English, and correspondence with authors is in English.

Good Practice Reviews

Good Practice Reviews are intended as management reference guides for field-based practitioners. They review operational experiences of good practice in the key areas of humanitarian activity. GPRs are developed in close consultation with HPN and a peer review group of experts. Normally, one Review is published each year.

Website

HPN's website at www.odihpn.org makes HPN publications available online. It also posts articles and book reviews that have been submitted to HPN for electronic publication. These are between 500 and 2,000 words long, and can be submitted in English at any time.

Submissions may be sent electronically to hpn@odi.org.uk or posted to HPN, Overseas Development Institute, 111 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD, UK.

If you have an idea for an article or paper you would like to develop, HPN staff would be pleased to discuss it with you – send an email to hpn@odi.org.uk, or call +44 (0)20 7922 0331.

Forthcoming special features in Humanitarian Exchange

Neutrality

Neutrality is traditionally regarded as a core, defining principle of humanitarianism. It is, however, interpreted in different ways by different humanitarian actors. While neutrality figures highly in humanitarian codes of conduct and organisational mandates, many believe that, with such crises as the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, neutrality is more than ever before under threat as a practical operating principle. Some believe it is essential that the principle of neutrality be respected and protected. For others it is impractical and unrealistic, or even a costly pretence. The November 2003 issue of Humanitarian Exchange will have a special feature of articles on neutrality in humanitarian action. If you would like to suggest or contribute an article on an aspect of the theory or practice of neutrality in humanitarian action, please contact hpn@odi.org.uk. The deadline for submissions is the end of September 2003.

The Great Lakes ten years on

April 7 2004 will be the tenth anniversary of the start of the Rwanda genocide. Up to a million people were killed in the genocide, hundreds of thousands more died as refugees in neighbouring countries, and the ramifications continue to claim many lives in the region. The events of 1994 revealed terrible failings in the international community and weaknesses in the international humanitarian system. The special feature of the March 2004 issue of Humanitarian Exchange will look at what has changed in the humanitarian context in the Great Lakes region, how the ability to respond to humanitarian catastrophe in the region and elsewhere has evolved as a result of the experience, and where further change is needed. If you would like to suggest or contribute an article, please contact hpn@odi.org.uk. The deadline for submissions is the end of January 2004.

Humanitarian Practice Network

The **Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN)** is an independent forum where field workers, managers and policymakers in the humanitarian sector share information, analysis and experience.

HPN's aim is to improve the performance of humanitarian action by contributing to individual and institutional learning.

HPN's activities include:

- A series of specialist publications: *Humanitarian Exchange* magazine, Network Papers and Good Practice Reviews.
- A resource website at www.odihpn.org.
- Occasional seminars and workshops bringing together practitioners, policymakers and analysts.

HPN's members and audience comprise individuals and organisations engaged in humanitarian action. They are in 80 countries worldwide, working in northern and southern NGOs, the UN and other multilateral agencies, governments and donors, academic institutions and consultancies. HPN's publications are written by a similarly wide range of contributors.

HPN's institutional location is the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), an independent think tank on humanitarian and development policy. HPN's publications are researched and written by a wide range of individuals and organisations, and are published by HPN in order to encourage and facilitate knowledge-sharing within the sector. *The views and opinions expressed in HPN's publications do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Humanitarian Policy Group or the Overseas Development Institute.*

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