

**An End to Forgotten Emergencies?****Embargoed until 00.01 May 17<sup>th</sup> 2000****Summary**

Currently, there are perhaps over 20 million people affected by drought in parts of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Around 8 million people are at risk from drought in Ethiopia, among 12 million people across the Horn of Africa. In February and March, international attention focused on the thousands of Mozambicans affected by floods. All these people are among 135 million people suffering from droughts, floods and earthquakes around the world. Around 30 million more have been forced to flee their homes because of war. Global needs for humanitarian aid are vast, and not set to decline in the near future. Western governments' aid falls far short of meeting these needs, and is distributed in a grossly unequal way. To the 1999 UN appeal for Kosovo and the rest of former Yugoslavia, donor governments gave \$207 for every person in need. Those suffering in Sierra Leone received \$16 a head, and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, little over \$8. They reflect the reality that Oxfam sees in disasters around the world: that, despite their own tenacious efforts, people suffer because not enough aid is given to those emergencies beyond the media spotlight, or outside the areas of interest to the main Western governments. As Western countries have got richer in the past ten years, the proportion of their wealth spent on humanitarian aid has gone down by 30%. The number of forgotten emergencies looks set to increase. The required response is not aid alone. Oxfam continues to press for international efforts to prevent conflict, tackle poverty, and promote respect for human rights. Yet humanitarian aid remains vital. Western countries must increase such aid to meet the scale of the need; and, crucially, they must distribute that aid on the basis of need, not of political interest or media coverage. We seek an end to forgotten emergencies. Oxfam's proposals include:

- **All donors should commit to collectively provide a global safety-net to ensure humanitarian assistance and protection for all those in need.**
- **Donors should devise an effective burden-sharing mechanism for meeting global humanitarian need based on their respective GNP.**
- **All donors to increase significantly their aid budgets to enable them to provide more humanitarian assistance without diverting resources from long-term development aid.**

**1. Introduction**

Why did the international community allow Ethiopia's food reserves to fall in 1999 despite increasing need for food aid? Why did the international humanitarian aid effort to Mozambique in February take so long to get organised? Did governments at first fail to pay Ethiopia or Mozambique sufficient attention because, unlike Kosovo, they are far away, neither politically nor economically important? Why in both cases did it take massive media coverage to mobilise eventually sufficient emergency assistance or speed up the delivery of food aid? This is not how the international humanitarian system is meant to work. The donor governments of the West proclaim their commitment to provide humanitarian aid in a timely manner, and, crucially, on the basis of life-saving need rather than governments' interests or media coverage.

*'When faced with a humanitarian crisis we have a responsibility to help reduce human suffering where we can...[DFID] will seek to promote a more universal approach in addressing humanitarian needs. People in need – wherever they are – should have equal status and rights to assistance.'*

In making this important commitment, the UK government's Department for International Development is entirely right: under international law, people in need - wherever they are - have equal status and rights to assistance. But in practice, international responses to emergencies are far from equal. That is what this paper is about.

Behind the statistics of those in need are countless individuals who daily demonstrate remarkable resilience and ingenuity in dealing with disaster and fighting for survival. Yet despite their own efforts, millions of people are experiencing crises that exceed their immediate capacities to cope. Governments continue to fund humanitarian assistance to alleviate some of this suffering. UN agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs), both international and local, all respond. The British public continues to demonstrate concern for those who suffer beyond our borders: the record of responses to joint NGO appeals shows an increasingly generous trend.<sup>2</sup> The appeal for Mozambique – that has now raised £22m, £13.5m of it in the first 6 days – confirms this pattern.

These responses should not just be seen as charity but an expression of the internationally agreed commitments to assist and protect civilians caught up in conflict and people dealing with disaster. The four Geneva Conventions and two attendant protocols form the hub of International Humanitarian Law. They set out the entitlements of all civilians in conflict to be treated humanely in all circumstances. A raft of international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, state the rights to food, water, shelter and more besides of those affected by 'natural disasters'. Along with the 1951 Refugee Conventions on the rights of refugees, these laws and conventions define the obligations of states and warring parties to provide humanitarian assistance, or allow it to be provided, to all those in need.

While the right to assistance is universal, the reality of provision is varied and inequitable. Not all those who require assistance receive it. Instead, each year, there are thousands of neglected people in forgotten emergencies for whom donors' declarations of support for equal rights mean little. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 2.1 million people face critical food insecurity and are receiving little or no assistance. Humanitarian workers on the ground estimate that they are only able to assist one seventh of the vulnerable populations considered accessible. In northern Sierra Leone, an estimated 2.6m people have been without sufficient access to relief for months. In Angola, 3.7 million people are affected by the war. A recent UN assessment described the humanitarian situation as alarming, particularly for many of the estimated 1.5 million people displaced from their homes. To make matters worse, as a share of the world's richest countries' wealth, the volume of official resources for humanitarian assistance is declining. Meanwhile, some of the underlying causes of violent conflict and disasters - intensifying poverty and scarcity of resources, economic marginalisation within and between countries, and exclusive and divisive politics – seem set to continue, if not worsen.

**This is not to say that an increase in humanitarian aid by itself will end the suffering of millions of human beings.** Oxfam continues to argue against 'aid-alone' policies. Humanitarian assistance should not substitute for effective political and economic responses to non-strategic areas of the globe where some of the worst humanitarian crises occur. Sustained international action is necessary to address the underlying causes of conflicts and to reduce vulnerability to natural disasters. Furthermore, humanitarian aid by itself is rarely solely responsible for saving lives, but rather a vital complement to people's own efforts to help themselves. The wrong kind of aid can sometimes do more harm than good. At times, warring parties' action to deny people access to humanitarian assistance is a more significant factor than lack of funds.

**But humanitarian aid and protection are vital. The vast inconsistency in how governments respond and how generously they provide is one of the most brutal inequalities in the world today.** Through international conventions and laws, we are committed to providing a global safety-net through which no one should fall. A potent combination of increased, timely, and accountable aid, buttressed by political, diplomatic, and economic action, can make a real difference in saving lives, and contributing to a safer future. Humanitarian action is a limited tool - it cannot and should not be expected to prevent or solve conflicts or disaster - but it is a vital dimension of international action and solidarity.

In an effort to improve the consistency and accountability of our own response to different emergencies, Oxfam is working with other humanitarian agencies on two initiatives. The first is a joint NGO effort to establishing practical proposals for a humanitarian ombudsman. The second initiative is the Sphere Project that sets out minimum standards of humanitarian response to which we will aspire in all instances. At the heart of the project is the Humanitarian Charter that sets out the signatories' commitment to protect life with dignity, and, through the development of accompanying technical standards, to articulate precisely what dignity means. The Sphere standards define the levels of nutrition, water, sanitation, shelter and health care below which no human being should be allowed to fall. Such standards pose a huge challenge to humanitarian agencies like Oxfam, and achieving them partly depends on a range of factors beyond our control. Yet, even more important than the standards, the Humanitarian Charter affirms a central fact: that it is the primary role and responsibility of states to provide assistance when people's capacity to cope has been exceeded. We are challenging governments to strengthen their commitment to humanitarian action, and to extend that commitment to ensure that every child, woman and man in need receives the humanitarian assistance and protection to which they are entitled. We are urging governments across the world to uphold every human being's right to life with dignity. It is our goal to ensure that there are no more forgotten emergencies.

This paper sets out evidence of the fluctuating levels of humanitarian funds against a backdrop of continuing need. It highlights the skewed and partial responses - on the part of governments and humanitarian agencies alike - that create 'forgotten emergencies'. We try to counter some of the frequent arguments against humanitarian action before setting out Oxfam's recommendations that we believe will contribute to ensuring that the rights to humanitarian assistance of every man, woman and child are upheld.

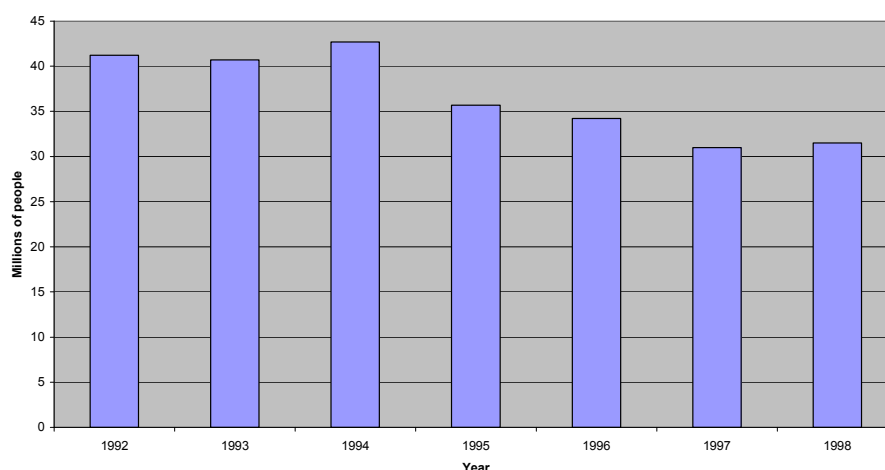
## 2. The evidence of need and response

### 2.1 The levels of need

Currently, more than 1 in every 280 people on earth is either a refugee, returnee or displaced person<sup>3</sup>. The Red Cross estimates that 335 million people - 5% of the world's population - lost their homes in 1998 as a result of climate-related disasters.<sup>4</sup> Identifying trends in global need for assistance is complicated by the fact that in many settings, precise quantification of those who are suffering is fraught with complexity, but the orders of magnitude are huge.

Broadly, towards the end of the 1990s, numbers of people displaced by conflict hit a plateau, while numbers of natural disasters and people affected by them continued to rise. The total number of refugees and asylum seekers has continued its general downward trend, reaching a ten-year low in 1998.

Total of significant populations of IDPs and refugees and asylum seekers by host country - World  
Disasters Report 1999 data



However, this is partly a reflection of the decline in refugee protection as many states, especially those in the developed world, show decreasing willingness to accept new refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s, forced migrants had far fewer opportunities to escape across borders, because more internal conflicts in neighbouring countries deterred potential refugees, protracted conflicts made borders impassable, and governments across the world - and particularly in Europe - continued to show a declining tolerance of asylum seekers. As a result, roughly two-thirds of the 30 million people who have been displaced in the past five years have become internally displaced, rather than refugees.

According to the Red Cross World Disasters report, over the last 10 years there has been an increase of more than 300 per cent in the numbers of people affected by floods and high winds. Increases in population densities, forcing more and more individuals to live in relatively high-risk areas, such as river deltas, are probably one of the major reasons for this. On the other hand, according to the same source, numbers of people reported to be affected by droughts and famines have declined by more than 80 per cent in the past 10 years, a fact attributed to effectiveness of food aid programmes and large-scale water programmes in Africa.<sup>6</sup> Yet climate change trends suggest frequent and severe fluctuations in future weather patterns, with intensified suffering as a result.

### 2.2 The gap between need and response

The prospect of increased suffering is all the more alarming because existing needs are barely met. One set of measures that demonstrate the mismatch between resources and needs is the UN Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) for aid to complex political emergencies. Over the last seven years, with the exception of the crisis in the Former Yugoslavia, and the Great Lakes region of Africa in the wake of Rwanda's genocide, all consolidated appeals were underfunded, some of them receiving barely half the funds requested even after the appeal had been revised.

Critics of the CAP process have argued that UN agencies overestimate needs, exaggerating the help that people require. Yet a recent evaluation of official Danish aid to Sudan identified 'a vicious cycle...whereby donors assume that appeals routinely overstate need, and revise their donations downwards. This leads operational agencies to reduce appeals according to what they envisage donors will tolerate.'<sup>7</sup> The same evaluation concluded that persistent underfunding, particularly in response to the annual CAPs, had a negative impact on the humanitarian response, causing under-investment in the humanitarian system and in disaster-preparedness. Oxfam knows from its own experience that the CAP process has flaws. Yet donors are implicated in its weaknesses. Efficient and reliable assessment and funding procedures are crucial to humanitarian response and preparedness. Reforming current procedures is the responsibility of governments, UN agencies and NGOs. **Despite the CAP's flaws, it is instructive to compare different appeals because of the clear discrepancy between donors' responses to different countries.**

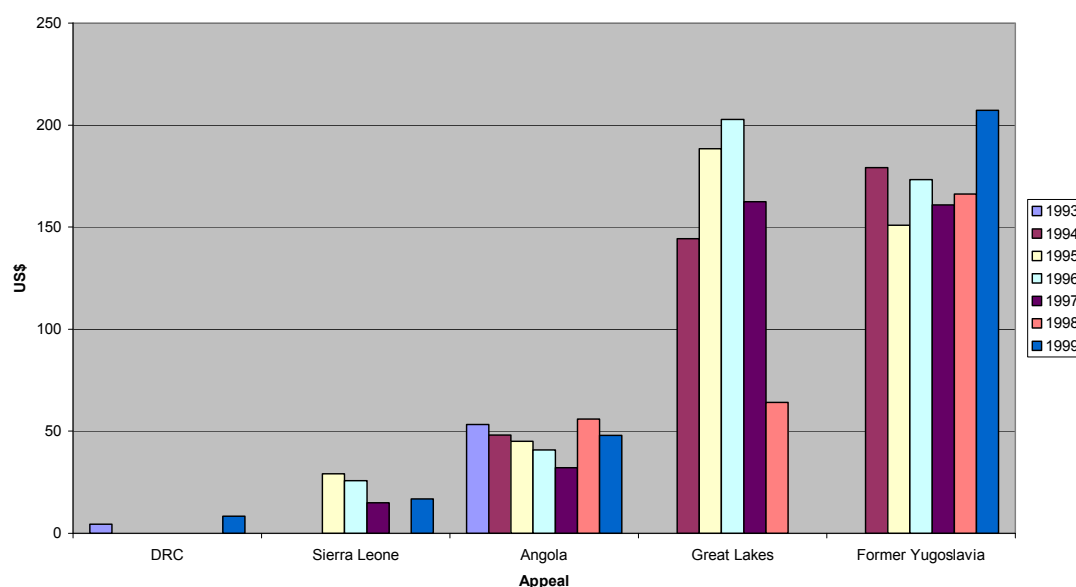
The plight of civilians in Afghanistan was ranked by the 1999 World Disasters Report as the world's worst emergency, yet only once in seven years has the CAP been more than 50 per cent funded. Similarly, Somalia has averaged only 40 per cent funding over five UN Consolidated Appeals. Other countries have fluctuating fortunes in the funding stakes: the 1994 appeal for Angola was 87 per cent funded, by 1997, barely 50 per cent of the requested amount had been received. Liberians in need did relatively well in 1995, but in 1998 received less than half what they needed according to the revised CAP. The average response to the Great Lakes crisis was 80% of requirements over six years, although this obscures the disparity between high levels of support in the wake of the genocide and a fall to 42 per cent funding in 1998. At a donor meeting in Tokyo in December 1999, pledges of support for the appeal for East Timor reached 75 per cent of the requested amount. The average of the responses to CAPs for complex emergencies each year between 1992 and 1999 never rose above 75 per cent, and are actually in decline. **If this broad trend continues, 'forgotten emergencies' will be even more neglected.**

## 2.3 The skewed nature of the response

The experience of one region stands out in stark contrast to the general underfunding of consolidated appeals: eight appeals launched since 1993 for those in need in the Former Yugoslavia have attained an average response of 85 per cent. Four of them exceeded 100 per cent of the requirements, a response unequalled by any UN Consolidated Appeals over the past decade.

Comparisons of per capita receipts reveal an even starker picture. In response to the 1999 appeal for Sierra Leone, funds received equalled US\$16 per capita of the targeted beneficiaries. For the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the figure was US\$8.40. For Angola in 1999 it was \$47.98. By contrast, the figure for the Former Yugoslavia was \$207.29 per capita. In eight years of appeals for complex emergencies by the UN, this was exceeded only once - by the appeal for Former Yugoslavia in 1993. Only the Great Lakes region has ever come close, at the height of crisis in 1994 and again in 1996. These figures are not the amounts received by each beneficiary, as offering assistance costs more in some places than others because of changing logistical constraints. However, such considerations do not account for the disparities described above.

Donor responses to selected UN CAP - per capita comparisons



The reality behind the statistics reflects the same stark contrast. Oxfam colleagues in Angola running a water and sanitation programme in Central Highland cities of Huambo, Malanje, and Kuito describe themselves as 'scratching the surface' of needs. They can only afford to assist the very worst off. This requires painful choices. Like other agencies in Angola, Oxfam is working below Sphere standards - providing water points for every 1000 people, rather than the standard of 1:250 set out by Sphere, which would increase the cost. By contrast, colleagues working in Albania in 1999 described an apparent absence of awareness that donor resources were finite. 'There was money to do almost anything and to do it almost anywhere.' The development costs of the US Army/OFDA site known as Camp Hope have been estimated at \$50m. That would have funded half of the entire 1999 appeal for Angola.

Accounts provided by the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) present a similar picture. In 1996, Former Yugoslavia received 38 per cent of ECHO's assistance, while a mere 31 per cent went to Africa Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states. In 1998, total commitments to Eastern Europe, the states of the former Soviet Union, and Former Yugoslavia came to 36 per cent, eclipsing the 32 per cent for ACP states. **In 1999, more than half the aid channelled through ECHO went to Kosovo and the continuing consequences of the earlier conflict in former Yugoslavia. This was four times the amount of aid to the 70 ACP countries.**

Figures from the UK's DFID differ somewhat from this trend. Over five years, an average 35 per cent of UK bilateral emergency assistance has been directed to Africa, while Europe received 24.2 per cent. (Asia has averaged 13.1 per cent, with the Americas averaging 3.32 per cent.) However, rough estimates for this period show that numbers of people in need in Africa were always at least four times the number of people in need in Europe.

This is not to begrudge those who receive more generous levels of humanitarian assistance than others do, but to highlight the fact that in reality, there is little commitment to universal entitlement to humanitarian assistance. To put it crudely, if the people suffering are geographically proximate to the potential donors, or the level of media coverage has reached such a point where people in effect become proximate the response will be greater. For those in far away places, it is easier to ignore the commitment to universal entitlement that is at the heart of the humanitarian idea.

The authors of an evaluation of the humanitarian response in the Great Lakes region in 1994 offer an example of the correlation between the volume and intensity of media coverage and the level of resources provided by international donors. They used data from the financial tracking department in the UN recording international expenditure by month, and records of the British NGO fundraising consortium – the Disaster Emergency Committee – showing weekly media coverage of events in Rwanda. Although the genocide began on the 6 April, it was not until the end of July and intense media coverage of the flight of refugees into neighbouring Zaire that donors' contributions soared.

Of course, donor funds are not the sole determinant of the varying degrees of humanitarian response. All governments have obligations to uphold the rights of civilians and citizens. Governments of countries in crisis bear the principal responsibility to aid their citizens. Their willingness or ability to meet needs plays a part in determining the levels of response to humanitarian need. For example, in north-east India, as a result of the quality of governance at state level, people living in Bihar or Assam, have a far worse chance of getting humanitarian assistance to help them cope with floods than people living in West Bengal. Governments – donors and otherwise – must commit themselves to end this lottery by expanding the provision of humanitarian assistance to allow all those in need to enjoy the support and dignity to which they are entitled.

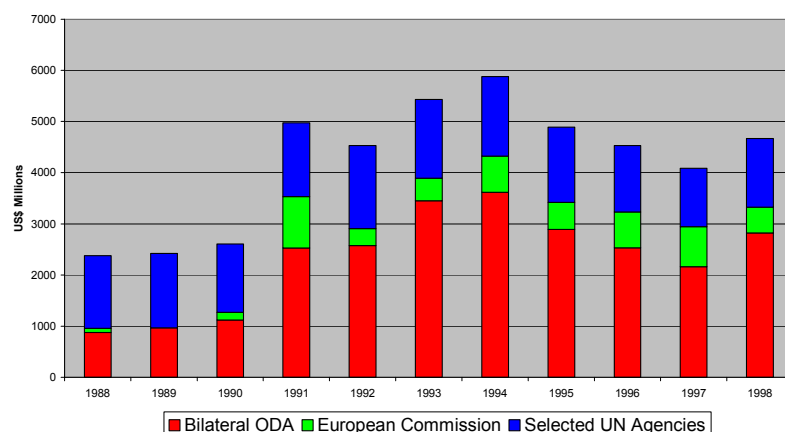
## 2.4 The decreasing commitment to aid

Despite the increasing demand for international engagement and assistance, over the last decade, there has been a steady decline in the flow of official development assistance to developing countries from the world's richest countries. This has knock-on effects on levels of humanitarian assistance. An increase in development aid through the 1980s reached its peak in 1992 at US\$60.8bn, 0.33 per cent of the GNP of the world's richest countries forming the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD. From then on, Official Development Assistance (ODA) has declined, reaching 0.22 per cent of GNP in 1997. G7 donors – the world's largest economies – were disproportionately responsible for this, accounting for practically all of the real fall in ODA in recent years. Although there was a slight upturn in 1998 to 0.23 per cent of GNP spent on ODA, this falls far short of international commitments to devote 0.7 per cent GNP to official development aid.<sup>8</sup> It also contrasts starkly with real terms growth in GNP in OECD countries from US\$11,000 per capita in

1960 to nearly \$28,000 in 1997, while ODA per capita grew very slowly – US\$47 in 1960 and US\$59 in 1997. **Increasing affluence has not brought increasing generosity, and the richest countries have been the meanest.**

Although over the last decade humanitarian aid levels from official donors have fluctuated, they have declined as a share of OECD wealth from 0.03 per

Total DAC ODA given as humanitarian relief 1988 to 1998



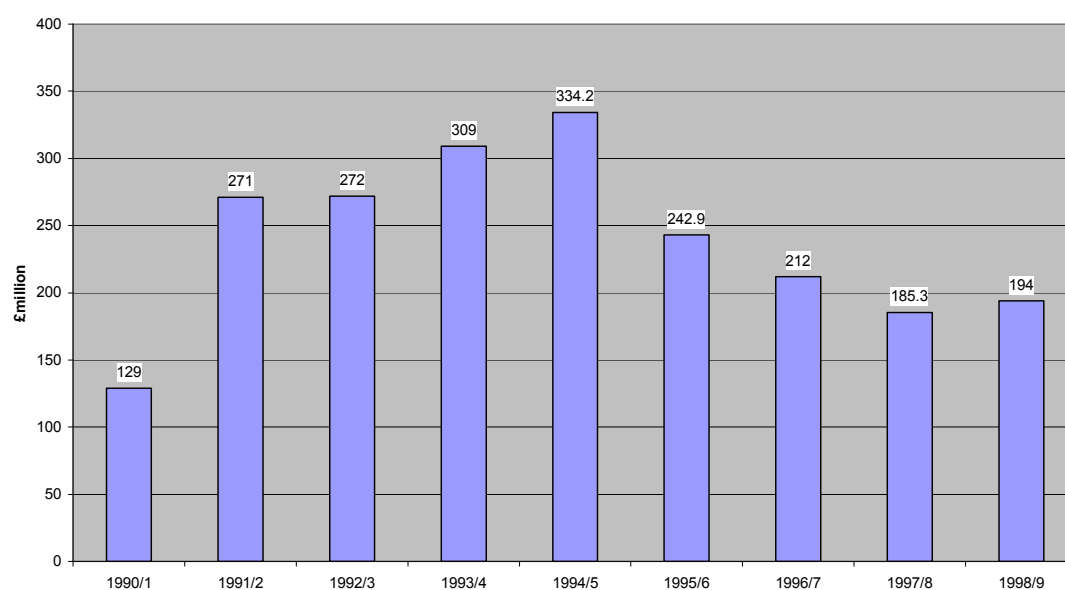
cent to 0.02 per cent. Donors demonstrated a surge of interest in humanitarian action at the beginning of the 1990s, coinciding with a rise in ODA. Overall levels of humanitarian aid peaked in 1994 at \$5.7bn as a result of the international humanitarian response to the refugee crisis in the wake of genocide in Rwanda.<sup>9</sup> However, while the aid response that year was exceptional, globally, the levels of need were not. Global refugee numbers in 1994/5 were not substantially different from those in the preceding 2 years.

After a decline for four years, in 1998, emergency aid provided by the 21 member states of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) increased to US\$4.5bn. One of the principal causes of this increase was the response to Central America's Hurricane Mitch: the volume of aid was equivalent to the combined contributions made by all donors to all natural disasters during the previous 5 years. Although in the wake of Mitch humanitarian needs were huge, this response was out of proportion with previous responses. Although emergency aid provided by the 21 member states of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has risen in the last two years, at US\$4.5bn it equals merely two days of global military spending and equals roughly a mere US\$5 for each person in OECD countries. The rise has done nothing to make the provision of humanitarian aid more equal between one crisis and another.

## 2.5 The differing responses of donors

Different governments bear differing levels of responsibility for the mismatch between human need and humanitarian action. Some governments are much more resolute in honouring their obligations than others. In recent years the UK Department for International Development has played a leading role in some aspects of humanitarian action, at the forefront of donor efforts to improve the response and performance of the humanitarian system, in particular that of NGOs. The UK is one of the few governments that has made a sustained effort to increase its commitment to ODA, and humanitarian assistance rose slightly in 1998/9.

DFID total humanitarian assistance 1990-1999



Along with the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA, the UK is one of the five major global providers of humanitarian aid, who together account for 64 per cent of the DAC total. However, the UK's share of the DAC total humanitarian assistance has declined steadily over the decade from roughly 6 per cent in 1990/1 to roughly 4 per cent in 1998/9. This 4 per cent is less than the 6.4 per cent that is the UK's share of DAC's GNP. The next group of five – Germany, Canada, Japan, Switzerland and Denmark - account for a further 25 per cent of DAC's humanitarian aid although they share 31.86 of DAC's GNP. Although there are discrepancies in reporting between different donors, by contrast, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands gave 27 per cent of humanitarian assistance in 1998 although they share only 3.3 per cent of DAC's GNP.<sup>10</sup>

The USA also falls down on this burden-sharing measure. Although the USA is the largest single donor of humanitarian assistance, contributing US\$900m in 1998 and 30 per cent of the bilateral total, this falls short of the 38.6 per cent that is the USA share of DAC GNP.

Non-OECD governments are also demonstrably failing to invest resources in humanitarian action and vulnerability reduction in the longer term. Many governments with citizens in crisis also fail to garner support for addressing the problems, although where they cannot honour their obligations to their populations, they are bound by international law to accept international assistance to meet humanitarian need.

### 3. So why don't donors do more?

The overwhelming reason for people in need being largely forgotten is the lack of political and economic interest of wealthy donor governments. But questions have also arisen about humanitarian aid's value. Are they valid? Oxfam fundamentally believes that increased humanitarian aid, based on need not political interest must be a vital part of a coherent approach to conflicts and disasters. Below, we address some of the counter-arguments.

- **'Conflict prevention is more important than humanitarian assistance'**

In recent years, the issue of conflict prevention has cropped up ever more frequently in discussions among donors. Some donors see an increasing commitment to prevent conflicts and disaster as more important than applying the 'sticking plaster' of humanitarian assistance. Increasingly, governments are stating their concern to strengthen states and individuals, whether through programmes to encourage good governance, or disaster prevention. This is welcome - although the challenge is to turn words into reality that makes meaningful difference in people's lives.

The wisdom of promoting conflict prevention is incontrovertible. Humanitarian assistance is by its nature short term and cannot substitute for a robust commitment to conflict prevention and tackling underlying causes of crisis. But the trouble comes when faith in conflict prevention condemns humanitarian aid as 'unfashionable' and unnecessary.

On those people who have not benefited from successful conflict prevention, or for whom the disaster has already struck, the inconsistent commitment to humanitarian assistance has a direct and negative impact. Consider the public health comparison: even within a National Health Service that operates rationing, no one is arguing that the Accident and Emergency Units of British hospitals should be replaced by preventative health-care services. **If donors are genuinely committed to ending suffering caused by conflict and disaster, increased commitment is needed to political and financial resources for prevention, and for humanitarian protection and assistance.**

- **'Aid does more harm than good'**

Some donors have expressed scepticism about humanitarian aid because of its potential negative consequences. Clare Short, British Secretary of State for Development, in an April 1998 speech, pointed to the source of some of this scepticism:

*'There is a general unease that not all is well in the world of humanitarianism ...[T]houghtful humanitarians have already realised that, in the eyes of many people, humanitarian aid has lost most of its moral currency. Once an undisputed symbol of solidarity with those struck down by misfortune and adversity, humanitarian assistance is now vilified by many as part of the problem: feeding fighters, strengthening perpetrators of genocide, creating new war economies, fuelling conflicts and perpetuating crises.'*<sup>11</sup>

This perspective is valuable in that it highlights what 'thoughtful humanitarians' have been wrestling with for years: the dilemmas inherent in working in complex environments, where the consequences of humanitarian action can, on occasions, do more harm than good. Where it is an explicit aim of warring parties to attack, intimidate, displace, or rob civilians, or accumulate wealth, humanitarian aid and action can become both a target and resource. Far from being impartial aid givers, humanitarian agencies can find themselves hostage to the tactics of warring parties. The Humanitarian Charter – part of Sphere - acknowledges this:



*'The frequent failure of warring parties to respect the purpose of interventions has shown that the attempt to provide assistance in situations on conflict may potentially render civilians more vulnerable to attack, or may...on occasion bring unintended advantage to one or more of the warring parties.'*

Oxfam has spent many years confronting the dilemmas attendant on working in such 'malign environments.' It is an uncomfortable fact that through the past decade the frequency of these dilemmas has intensified. Such frequency does not make the deliberations any easier, as we weigh up the potential negative consequences of humanitarian assistance that is diverted - a continuing challenge in Sudan- or stolen, as we encountered in Liberia in 1996, or liable to make people vulnerable to attack, as in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1997. Yet the proper response to these dilemmas is not to turn the edict to 'do no harm' into 'do nothing'. Rather, it is to deploy strategies to minimise the negative consequences and maximise the positive such that the 'net benefit' of our humanitarian action is increased assistance and protection of non-combatants.

Over the years, Oxfam has adopted a number of strategies in grappling with the messy reality of humanitarian action. In Burundi, we have been confronted twice in two years with the dilemma of how to respond to intensifying needs of people who have been 'regrouped' by the government into camps. Oxfam has worked with other NGOs and UN agencies to establish a framework for humanitarian action that prescribed live-saving assistance only, and presented to the Government the necessary conditions - such as freedom of assessment and monitoring - to allow NGOs to work in the camps and minimise their complicity in the Government's military strategy. In Liberia in mid 1996, Oxfam and twelve other humanitarian agencies decided to limit their operations after more than 400 vehicles and millions of dollars' worth of relief equipment and goods had been looted by warring parties, who went on to use these resources to fund their war. Instead we decided to limit our work to using only locally available equipment, and instead of assisting people across the country through working on water systems, to limit food distributions to those which would prevent starvation.

Calculations about how to ensure net benefit have to be made on a case-by-case basis. This demands acute awareness of the environment in which we work and Oxfam's role in it. We need to be aware of the political and economic interests which drive or fuel the conflict, and to undertake advocacy to promote effective action to stop conflict and ensure greater respect of human rights.

- **'There is no access'**

In many conflicts, people in need of humanitarian assistance are not always accessible. For example, mortality rates have climbed dramatically among East Timorese refugees in West Timor, where insecurity limits the willingness and ability of aid agencies to engage. And in Hazarajat in Afghanistan, constraints imposed by the conflict and warring parties have left the civilian population hemmed in and besieged, cut off from aid and trade. It is argued by some that there is no point in providing funds for humanitarian assistance if it cannot reach those most in need. What such an argument ignores is the importance of concerted political action to ensure greater levels of access to those entitled to assistance. UN Security Council members have a clear responsibility to demonstrate respect for international humanitarian law. It is their role to undertake robust diplomacy, backed up with the threat of consequent sanctions, against violators of international humanitarian law. They should give active support for UN leadership in negotiating with warring parties to secure access and respect for impartial humanitarian agencies. Of course this is not always easy. The plight of the people of Chechnya is a painful reminder of the complex problems of ensuring people's access to the humanitarian assistance and protection to which they are entitled. But access can rarely be achieved without political action. Humanitarian agencies, and humanitarian action, depend on the actions of governments to uphold international humanitarian law.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper has not examined the causes of conflict nor offered detailed recommendations to prevent conflict and disaster. Oxfam has written about this elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Instead it makes a simple point: while conflict and calamity persist, all human beings are entitled to assistance and protection to ensure that their lives are protected and that they continue to enjoy dignity even in the midst of despair.

Donor governments are bound morally and legally to provide that humanitarian assistance and protection. The moral case is evident: it demeans us all as human beings to allow others to suffer,

particularly as the result of conflict or crisis linked to poverty and global economic inequities. By ratifying the Geneva Conventions, the 185 signatory states have accepted responsibility in law to protect and assist those in need. There is a third vital incentive for international action: it is in the interest of us all to help countries in crisis get on their feet. It benefits us all to have a more stable world. Given this global pattern of mutual interest, governments are bound to share the burden of meeting humanitarian obligations.

Oxfam has argued repeatedly that aid alone is not the solution; that humanitarian assistance cannot substitute for political action. The converse is also true: political action in response to the consequences of violent conflict or natural disasters will not on its own to alleviate human suffering. Bluntly, people need to be alive to enjoy the benefits of the political solutions to their problems.

For millions of people, humanitarian assistance offers a vital lifeline. It is also an important expression of solidarity and humanity, stemming from a sense that suffering of any human being affects us all. Governments have shown their willingness to respond to humanitarian need – the crises in Former Yugoslavia and East Timor have demonstrated that. But too many people miss out, and are left without assistance or protection. We seek a reinvigorated international commitment to the principle of universality at the heart of humanitarianism, through greater and more equitable provision of assistance and protection. This should not be in place of the commitment to prevention, nor the commitment to end global injustices and inequalities that intensify poverty and cause crisis for millions. Rather the humanitarian idea has a unique role and function in support of fellow human beings.

### 5. Recommendations

*The following are among Oxfam's recommendations to ensure effective international humanitarian action.*

- 1. The international response to humanitarian crises should be determined by need, not strategic interest, or media coverage.**
- 2. The UN Security Council and its members should promote humanitarian action through coordinated approaches:** humanitarian assistance and protection backed up by political and economic action to uphold international humanitarian law, to secure access and ensure the protection of non-combatants. The UN Secretary General's recommendations to better protect civilians in conflicts, included in his September 1999 report, deserve urgent consideration.
- 3. All donors should make publicly stated commitments to collectively provide a global safety-net to ensure humanitarian assistance and protection for all those in need.** This should include recognition of their responsibility to respond to suffering in malign environments, and to support preparedness measures.
- 4. Donors should devise an effective burden-sharing mechanism for meeting global humanitarian need based on their respective wealth.** Members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) should undertake to contribute at least their GNP-percentage share to every humanitarian appeal. This requires commitment to aid at the heart of government, and flexible mechanisms to allow aid ministries to draw on resources for exceptional needs. The DAC should monitor and publish progress against this goal.
- 5. All donors to increase significantly their aid budgets to enable them to provide more humanitarian assistance without diverting resources from long-term development aid.**

6. **Governments should collaborate with the UN to establish an internationally credible mechanism for the formulation of consolidated appeals for assistance**, and the formulation and agreement on strategies for response. This could include establishing a central unit in an appeal country with the responsibility to establish the absolute and relative levels of humanitarian need across the country on a standardised basis, and to play a key role in working with government, donors, UN agencies and NGOs to develop a framework for response to aid coordination and coherence.
7. **Governments and donors should collaborate on strategies to develop appropriate preparedness capacities at global, regional and local levels.**
8. **Within the context of establishing a global safety-net, donors – such as OECD governments and ECHO - should plan potential humanitarian spend for regions/countries prone to crisis in an effort to improve the timeliness and effectiveness of humanitarian response.** Figures should be based on burden-sharing responsibilities and decisively reversing the downward trend of humanitarian spend.
9. **NGOs should improve their commitment to consistent aid through making progress in disseminating the charter and standards of the Sphere Project**, and striving to adhere to Sphere in practice. NGOs should increase their accountability to beneficiaries through the development of practical proposals for a humanitarian ombudsman.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Department for International Development (1999) 'Conflict Reduction and Humanitarian Assistance Policy Statement,' DFID, February 1999, p4.

<sup>2</sup> The Disasters Executive Committee - now including 15 UK NGOs - has been appealing to the public for support for particular emergencies since 1966. The 1989 appeal for funds for the Ethiopian famine raised £10 m. The 1991 appeal for Africa raised £17 m, Rwanda's crisis raised £37m and Kosovo raised £53 m.

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the people of concern to UNHCR as of 1 January 1999 i.e. 21.5 million people.

<sup>4</sup> *The Guardian*, 22 December 1999 'Hell and high water, article by Tim Radford.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p157.

<sup>6</sup> International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (1999) *World Disasters Report 1999*, Oxford: OUP, p144.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, DANIDA (1999) *Evaluation of Danish Humanitarian Assistance*, Volume 7, pxiii.

<sup>8</sup> G7 donors reaffirmed this commitment at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio.

<sup>9</sup> Presenting overall totals of humanitarian aid are complex. The figures here aggregate total bilateral ODA for emergency and distress relief including emergency food aid as reported by donors to the DAC in table 1, ODA from the Commission of the European Union for Emergency and Distress relief including emergency food aid as reported to DAC, total multilateral contributions to UNHCR and UNRWA and a pro rata share of WFP multilateral funding based on its own calculation of the share of total income allocated to relief. These figures and those on donor aggregates are drawn from early research for the forthcoming UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs report 'Global Humanitarian Assistance 2000', edited by Development Initiatives, [judith@devinit.org](mailto:judith@devinit.org).

<sup>10</sup> They are also among the most generous providers of ODA.

<sup>11</sup> Short, C (1998). 'Principles for a new humanitarianism,' speech presented to ECHO/ODI conference on 'Principled Aid in an Unprincipled World: Relief, war and humanitarian principles,' London, UK.

<sup>12</sup> For example Cairns, E (1997) *A safer future: reducing the human cost of war*, Oxford: Oxfam.

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