

Crises in a New World Order

Challenging the humanitarian project

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A woman collects water in Lafole, Somalia, supplied by Oxfam & SAACID. Photo: Oxfam Novib

In 2010, vast humanitarian crises from Haiti to Pakistan almost overwhelmed the international system's ability to respond. Despite years of reform, UN agencies, donors, and international NGOs (INGOs) struggled to cope. In 2011, Somalia yet again saw a response too little and too late, driven by media attention, not a timely, impartial assessment of human needs. At the same time, humanitarian action is needed now more than ever. The growing number of vulnerable people, the rise in disasters, and the failure to put most fragile states on the path to development, will significantly increase needs.

Western-based donors, INGOs and the UN provide only part of the answer. Already, new donors and NGOs from around the world provide a significant share of humanitarian aid. Future humanitarian action will rely on them, and on the governments and civil society of crisis-affected countries, even more. The UN and INGOs will be vital, but their contribution will increasingly be measured by how well they complement and support the efforts of others, and encourage every humanitarian actor to uphold humanitarian principles.

Summary

Tens of millions of people suffer in today's humanitarian crises. In East Africa alone, over 13 million have faced a devastating food crisis.

But millions of people also *help* their neighbours, families and communities. In Pakistan, neighbours, communities and local NGOs were once again first with relief when floods struck in 2011, just as they had been in 2010, when aid agencies struggled to reach the 14 million in need of assistance.

Much still to do

Twenty years ago, the UN General Assembly recognized that it was the crisis-affected state, not international agencies, that had the 'primary role in ... humanitarian assistance'¹ when it passed the resolution in December 1991, that charted a new course for humanitarian action, and set up what became today's Office for Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Since then, the UN and other agencies have saved millions of lives. In 2005, Emergency Relief Co-ordinator Jan Egeland launched a package of reforms to improve UN leadership, co-ordination, and the funding of humanitarian responses.

But, seven years later, international humanitarian action is still too little or too late, especially when crises fail to grip the world media's attention. It still cannot cope with multiple 'mega-disasters', like Pakistan or Haiti, or the demand that will grow as the number of weather-related disasters increase and fewer conflicts are resolved.

UN leadership and co-ordination is inconsistent. Too little international aid makes the most of its impact by working with local organizations on the ground. In many countries, there is also a growing sentiment against Western-based humanitarian agencies.

In large part, the future of humanitarian action lies not in the North, but in the diverse array of local, national, and regional authorities, and civil society and religious organizations in the countries where conflicts continue and disasters strike. Building their capacity must be central to humanitarian action, as capacity building has been in development for years.

At the moment, the capacity of crisis-affected countries is enormously varied. Some states are increasingly effective in preparing for and responding to emergencies. They are conscious of their responsibilities to their citizens and are willing to meet them. But in almost every region, some governments lack the necessary capacity or use what they have in a partisan way.

Civil society is also enormously varied and has faced both successes and failures in building its capacity further. The combination of the effective state and active civil society is too often absent in countries vulnerable to crises. Meeting the challenge to build both is essential for effective emergency response and to build communities' resilience to the disasters, violence, and other shocks they may face.

A disaster occurring during the Olympics must have three times as many fatalities as a disaster on an ordinary day to have equal chance of receiving US relief.

World Bank (2010)²

In 2009, only 1.9 per cent of donor government funds to NGOs went to organizations based in disaster-affected countries.

Development Initiatives (2011)³

Against this background, the UN and international NGOs (INGOs) will be as vital as ever. But their contribution will increasingly be measured by how they complement and support the capacities and efforts of crisis-affected countries.

In some countries, INGOs' operations will be needed for years. But in others, their impact will rest on becoming 'humanitarian brokers': facilitating, supporting, and bringing together local civil society. To achieve this, INGOs, including Oxfam, face five major challenges to overcoming the difficulties inherent in improving humanitarian action.

The international humanitarian sector remains trapped in the notion that we need to be the ones saving all the lives. As a community, we are unprepared to assume the new increasing demands due to climate change. We must build up and support other key local actors who can multiply our effective impact.

J. Ocharan and M. Delaney (2011)⁴

Key challenges

The key challenges for INGOs are to:

- build the capacity of states and civil society while making difficult judgements on how to work with states with varying capacities and commitments to humanitarian principles, and finding vastly different civil society capacity;
- build communities' resilience to cope with disasters, climate change, violence, and economic and political shocks, while maintaining the operational capacity to respond when needed;
- encourage states and others to uphold humanitarian principles, while learning from non-Western agencies how to implement them in different contexts, and recognizing that ethical humanitarian action demands upholding principles *and* making difficult judgements based on the consequences of different courses of action;
- encourage new and different sources of funding and action from emerging economies, private companies, and others, while encouraging them to uphold humanitarian principles, and respond to needs wherever they are;
- strengthen the quality and accountability of INGOs, including through some form of certification of effective humanitarian action, while recognizing the value of diverse and varied humanitarian agencies.

None of the challenges are easy. Oxfam and others are learning how to meet them. It will take years, in places decades, to build genuinely global humanitarian action, rooted in crisis-affected countries.

But the successes and failures of past crises do point to the following lessons. Some of them will be difficult to implement. But they are vital to improving humanitarian aid in the often dangerous and always difficult circumstances in which it is given.

Recommendations

This paper recommends that:

Every actor involved in humanitarian aid should:

- deliver aid impartially, independently, and based on assessed needs;
- strive to be sensitive to the vulnerabilities of gender, age, and disability;
- be more accountable to those who have been affected;
- put a greater focus on building local capacity and on disaster risk reduction;
- make timely and appropriate responses to warnings of disaster; and
- when faced with difficult dilemmas, make transparent decisions based on the best possible judgement on the consequences of different courses of action.

Crisis-affected governments should:

- do all they can to generate the will and resources to reinforce emergency preparedness and response capacities, with legislation and early warning triggers to generate an immediate principled response;
- deliver social protection programmes to meet the needs of vulnerable people, and increase their resilience; and
- ensure equal access to all essential services – including health, education, justice, and security – to help build resilience to violence.

Regional organizations should:

- develop their capacity to support national governments; and
- if necessary, catalyse them into action.

OECD and emerging donor governments should:

- focus an increasing proportion of their funding on building affected governments' capacity, and treat this as a key indicator of aid;
- double the proportion of total aid dedicated to reduce the risk of disasters; and
- strive to increase resilience to violence in fragile states.

INGOs should:

- put a greater focus on building local capacity and on disaster risk reduction, in order to gradually reduce operational responses where local capacity is sufficient;
- advocate and respond immediately to warnings of disasters;
- depending on the state, they should strive to combine strong advocacy for humanitarian principles with respect for the state's vital role; and

The important humanitarian shift is in our investment in organizations beyond Oxfam, more strategically than ever before.

S. Springett, East Asia
Humanitarian Co-ordinator, Oxfam
GB (2011)

- where appropriate, strengthen their humanitarian identity to distinguish themselves from other actors, developing some form of certification to show that agencies meet a standard of effective, efficient, impartial, and timely humanitarian action, including genuine partnership with local organizations.

The UN should:

- ensure a strong Humanitarian Co-ordinator in every crisis;
- redouble its efforts to improve its humanitarian leadership, wherever possible in partnership with the affected state; and
- maintain a 'firewall' between political and peacekeeping functions and humanitarian operations, even in integrated missions.

All parties to armed conflicts must:

- allow civilians access to whatever humanitarian aid they need and protect them from violence; and
- facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of that humanitarian relief, and ensure freedom of movement and safety for humanitarian workers.⁵

Notes

- ¹ UN General Assembly (1991) Annex: A/RES/46/182 <http://www.un.org/documents/qa/res/46/a46r182.htm> (last accessed 29 December 2011)
- ² World Bank (2010) 'Natural Hazards, Unnatural Disasters: the economics of effective prevention', http://publications.worldbank.org/index.php?main_page=product_info&products_id=23659 (last accessed 29 December 2011)
- ³ Development Initiatives (2011a), *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2011*, p. 40, <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/gha-report-2011.pdf> (last accessed 29 December 2011)
- ⁴ M. Delaney and J. Ocharan (2011) 'Local Capacity in Humanitarian Response: Vision or Mirage?' Oxfam America paper, Boston: Oxfam
- ⁵ For more detail on warring parties' responsibilities under the Geneva Conventions, and the 'right to humanitarian assistance in international law and custom', see:
Oxfam International (2011) 'The Right to Survive: the humanitarian challenge for the twenty-first century', <http://www.oxfam.org/policy/right-to-survive-report> (see 29 December 2011)

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