

Re-thinking aid policy in protracted crises

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There has been a significant shift in thinking regarding the relationship between relief and development over the past decade. This has been driven by a number of factors, including an increased focus on linking aid and security. These new connections present both opportunities and challenges for humanitarian action. On the one hand, greater attention and resources may go towards countries which historically have not received a proportionate level of aid. On the other hand, the landscape in crisis countries has become increasingly crowded with a range of military and security interventions taking place alongside development and humanitarian interventions. This makes it increasingly difficult (particularly for belligerents) to distinguish between the different forms of assistance and protection being offered.

Given that these actors all work with differing mandates, reaching a common understanding of mutual roles and responsibilities within and between organisations responding to crises will be crucial.

During the 1990s, aid organisations examined ways to link relief and development assistance more effectively. Initially discussed around programming in response to natural disasters, these ideas were steadily adapted to the demands of conflict-related crises. The shift assumed that aid (particularly development aid) could be used to prevent conflict, by addressing grievances and reducing economic instability. The premise was that conflict-related crises were transitory: short interruptions to an otherwise progressive, state-led process of development. While this was not a shared view – and some approaches to linking relief and development acknowledged the reality that ‘crisis’ had in many cases become the norm – it did influence much of the policy formulation.

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Problems around this ‘relief–development continuum’ were seen as primarily managerial. There was concern about creating dependency, and about how to make relief more developmental and sustainable. Much of this was driven by multi-mandated UN agencies and NGOs. Despite advances, there was not much progress, either in programming or in policy. There were four key obstacles:

- The debate was driven largely by humanitarian agencies, who were relatively marginal on the international aid stage, both in volume of spending and in capacity to shape aid policy.
- Development and humanitarian responsibilities were quite distinct and there was little appetite for radical organisational change.
- The debate failed to keep pace with the changing form and intensity of protracted crises.
- The distinction between relief and development aid was political. In many protracted crises donor governments used relief aid to avoid engaging with states they perceived to be repressive or undemocratic.

From the late 1990s, a number of new factors arose and the focus switched from the links between relief and development to the broader dimensions of aid and security. There was a steady internationalisation of responsibility for human security and welfare, where necessary, conducted outside the framework of recipient states. A range of mechanisms for intervention were designed to assist in re-engaging with countries previously excluded from development assistance. Along with that was a growing convergence between the way in which both development and humanitarian aid were perceived.



Lhok Kruet, Aceh, Indonesia, June 2005 (©REUTERS/Beawiharta/ courtesy www.alertnet.org)

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The events of 9/11 reinforced the links between aid and security. Policy shifts in the European Union, World Bank and US and other donor governments all highlighted that aid was now expected to contribute to counter-terrorism and security. Aid ministers represented at the OECD Development Assistance Committee signalled changes in the definition of Official Development Assistance (ODA), to include activities in the field of security sector reform. While the language of counter-terrorism was largely new, the precepts drew squarely on first-generation thinking regarding aid and conflict: a concern with the security of people, rather than states; an international and multi-disciplinary response; and a conditional, rather than absolute, respect for sovereignty.

Security and coherent governmental approaches to engaging in crises has increasingly become a driver for aid policy. In Canada, there has been an attempt to bring together diplomacy, defence and development policy. In the Netherlands, a Stability Fund promotes an integrated policy-driven approach to situations emerging from armed conflict. The UK's Conflict Prevention Pools and the recent establishment of a Post-conflict Reconstruction Unit seek to develop common strategies across government in relation to conflicts. In the US, in a radical departure, the Office of Food for Peace has decided no longer to distinguish between development and emergency food assistance in fragile, failing and failed states. Organisationally, at least, many donor governments recognise that poverty reduction alone will not deliver conflict reduction, and that there is a need for more systematic linkage of investment in 'soft' and 'hard' security approaches.

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Shifts in the policy environment are already resulting in increased spending in countries undergoing protracted crisis. However, optimism concerning potential increases should be tempered by the caveat that selectivity will persist, and strategic interest will remain a core priority. While the development community is seeking better ways to dovetail its efforts with those of the humanitarian community, humanitarians are often seeking to distinguish themselves from at least some aspects of the developmental enterprise. The EU's Constitution has distinct chapters on development and humanitarian assistance, with the latter

reaffirming a commitment to principles of impartiality and neutrality. The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative established at Stockholm in 2003 also recognises the distinctive purposes, principles and operating conditions of humanitarian aid.

What remains weakly debated and understood is the extent to which the objectives, principles and standards of humanitarian action are necessarily distinct from those of development, and the basis on which competing priorities can be resolved. Nor is it clear how it might be possible to measure the contribution of different types of intervention (humanitarian, development, security, military) to humanitarian outcomes. There is growing recognition of the extent to which the achievement of humanitarian goals, particularly the protection of civilians, is contingent upon political action in a variety of ways – from securing access for relief, to the deployment of protective military force, to the granting of asylum for those fleeing violence.

Economic growth and poverty eradication remain at the centre of the development agenda. These goals are not central to humanitarian action. None the less, there is considerable scope for exploring common ground between the two traditions. In doing this, both will need to decide how they position themselves politically in relation to national and international organisations, to what degree they are concerned with protecting and assisting populations at risk, and the most appropriate mechanisms to achieve this.

The authors' research briefing on which this article is based can be found at:

www.odi.org.uk/hpg/trendso3_04.html

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