

HPG Research Briefing

Dependency and humanitarian relief: a critical analysis

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In many emergency contexts, aid agencies hesitate to provide aid for extended periods because of fears that doing so may create 'dependency'. These concerns can influence decisions about levels of assistance, and what type of assistance people receive, where and when. Relief should not be withheld without solid evidence that the needs which prompted it in the first place have been met. This argues for caution about how the label 'dependency' is applied, and how it is used to justify reductions in relief.

People depend less on relief than is often assumed. There is little evidence that relief undermines initiative, or that it is delivered reliably or transparently enough for people to depend on it. In practice, many concerns about dependency seem to stem from a preoccupation with the disincentive effects of food aid. However, framing these real concerns in terms of dependency is unhelpful because it can provide an excuse for cutting back relief for people who may still be in desperate need.

The more important question is what form of assistance is most appropriate to prevent hunger, save lives and alleviate suffering in times of crisis. The focus should not be on avoiding dependency, but on providing sufficiently reliable and transparent assistance so that those who most need it understand what they are entitled to, and can rely on it as part of their own efforts to survive and recover from crisis.

Discourses around dependency often blame the symptom, rather than the cause. Relief aid has often been the most visible, if not the only, form of international engagement in long-running crises. In these contexts, relief is criticised for failing to improve the situation, and enabling recovery or development. Yet humanitarian aid may be a wholly inappropriate instrument for that purpose. The problem lies, not with relief and its failings, but with the lack of other forms of international engagement with crises.

Relief should not be withheld without solid evidence that the needs which prompted it in the first place have been met. This is not to imply that agencies should ignore the potentially negative effects of aid, but it does suggest a need for caution about how we apply the label dependency, and use it to justify reductions in relief.

About HPG

The Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice. It conducts independent research, provides specialist advice and promotes informed debate.



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This HPG Briefing Paper reports on research exploring what ‘dependency’ means in a humanitarian context, how it is used and the implications this has for how relief is provided.

The term ‘dependency’ often conceals as much as it reveals, and can have many different meanings. Certain assumptions and meanings do, however, underpin its common usage within the discourse of humanitarian aid. Dependency is:

- generally seen as negative and to be avoided;
- associated with the provision of relief, and contrasted with development approaches;
- seen as undermining people’s initiative;
- contrasted with a variety of positive values or terms, notably independence, self-sufficiency, self-reliance and sustainability; and
- seen as a particular problem when relief assistance has been provided over a prolonged period.

Broadly speaking, it is possible to identify four main ways in which the term is used. These are:

- Relief risks creating a ‘dependency mentality’ or ‘dependency syndrome’, in which people expect continued assistance. This undermines initiative, at individual or community levels.
- Relief undermines local economies, creating a continuing need for relief assistance and trapping people in chronic dependency on outside assistance.
- Dependence on external assistance as one of the features of extreme poverty, associated with a sense of shame or defeat.
- Dependency on relief resources on the part of governments at local or national levels, warring parties or aid agencies.

One of the objectives of this research is to disentangle the various meanings, functions and ways in which the term dependency is used in humanitarian relief. We suggest a value-neutral definition, adapted from the development literature:

A person is aid dependent when they cannot meet immediate basic needs in the absence of relief assistance.

This has the virtue of seeing aid dependence as neither a good nor a bad thing. The definition can easily be adapted to work at different levels – the community, nationally, at the level of the individual: a community or a country is aid dependent when it cannot meet the immediate basic needs of its citizens in the absence of external relief assistance.

In development theory, dependency is the antithesis of development approaches that aim at empowerment, participation and sustainability. The term dependency is often used in the context of debates around the problematic idea of some sort of transition between relief and development, with relief being seen as intrinsically undesirable because it creates dependency. A specific concern raised in this context is that relief interventions will undermine ongoing developmental

programmes. Once people have become accustomed to receiving free commodities, the fear is that they will be less willing to make contributions to community development projects without being paid. It is also important to situate debates around dependency within a wider literature on livelihoods, social protection and coping strategies in response to crises. This stresses the point that people affected by emergencies are not passive recipients of aid, but use it as one of many ways to survive and recover. Aid assistance is therefore better seen as one of a range of options that people may be able to draw upon in their struggle to deal with crisis.

Functions of dependency

There have been regular attempts to debunk the ‘myth of dependency’, yet the term has been remarkably persistent. Perhaps the best way of explaining this persistence is to examine the term’s different functions for the various actors involved in emergency relief.

A fear of creating dependency is sometimes used by aid agencies to justify scaling back relief entitlements. Trying to reduce dependence on aid, however, risks furthering other and more negative forms of dependence. For instance, the 1996 review of Operation Lifeline Sudan found that reductions in relief entitlements, linked with a desire to move towards more developmental approaches, had made people more vulnerable, forcing them into exploitative working conditions and increasing their exposure to violence.¹

Critics of the use of dependency arguments to justify reducing relief have stressed the need to work from a firm evidence base. Vaguely formulated concerns about dependency should not be sufficient reason to reduce relief in the absence of alternatives for sustaining livelihoods. Aid agencies have a responsibility to establish empirically sound data on which to make judgements about the ongoing need for assistance.

Are relief recipients dependent?

There is a sense in which the degree of dependency can be empirically investigated in particular contexts, and it is possible to assess the contribution that aid makes to people’s livelihoods. What is not clear, however, is at what level a household or individual can be said to be dependent on the assistance they receive. Is a family where aid makes up 70% of their food needs dependent? Is it not dependent if the proportion is 30%? Even if aid contributes only a small percentage of calorific requirements, it could potentially make the difference between having just enough food and being malnourished.

Thinking about dependence in terms of what proportion of household needs aid provides is not particularly useful, and will in any case vary in different places, and between different households in the same place. What little literature exists on this issue tends to suggest that aid often makes up a smaller proportion of livelihood strategies than is often assumed by the agencies providing the assistance. Aid can, however, play a crucial role, and in some cases makes up a significant part of what enables people to survive.

¹ Ataul Karim et al., *OLS Operation Lifeline Sudan: A Review*, 1996.

Key findings of the research

Ability to depend on relief

- In situations of acute risks to survival, aid agencies should be aiming as a positive objective to ensure that people are able to reliably depend on receiving assistance.
- Rather than seeing a risk of dependence as a justification for reducing relief, agencies should aim to provide assistance early and generously, to enable people to maintain their livelihoods and forestall a slide into destitution.
- In order to be able to rely on relief assistance, people need to understand what they are entitled to. This reinforces arguments for investing more in improving the transparency of assistance.
- The label 'dependency' is often applied in cases where people are exploiting opaque systems. If people better understand what relief is on offer and can participate in its management and delivery, they may be less likely to try to subvert or abuse relief programmes.

Disincentive effects

- There is a need for concern about the potential negative effects of aid and the possible disincentive effects of relief, particularly food aid. But this concern should not be

assumed, and it is unhelpful to label this as dependency.

- The possibility of disincentive effects for agricultural production should not be seen as an argument for stopping or reducing relief if it is still needed.
- Disincentive effects are an argument for looking at the appropriateness of the assistance that is being provided, not at whether it should be provided at all.
- There is a strong argument that relief actors should be more concerned with the possible disincentive effects of public works schemes.

Analysis and attitudes

- Rather than seeing dependency on relief in negative terms, we should be trying to understand the role that relief plays in the complex web of interdependencies that make up livelihoods under stress in crises.
- There is a need to investigate the attitudes of elites towards poor people, both within agencies and among agencies' local partners.

Relief and social protection

- There is potential to explore ways to link relief with long-term social protection and welfare.

Crises represent extreme levels of vulnerability and risk. In a sense, therefore, dependence is a defining feature of the need for humanitarian action. When shocks undermine a household's ability to meet their subsistence needs as part of their regular livelihoods, then they have to depend on some form of transfer. The question is whether it will be public or private, on what terms it will be provided and whether the consequences beyond the immediate meeting of subsistence needs are negative or positive. These generic questions apply equally whether dependence is on food aid, on loans from money lenders at high interest rates or on relatives abroad sending more money home.

Dependence can also be used by poor people themselves to describe aspects of poverty. In Ethiopia and Kenya, the receipt of food aid is associated with a sense of stigma, shame and defeat. Having to rely on external assistance can undermine fundamental desires for independence and autonomy. Attempts to develop theories of human need stress that people require some degree of freedom, as well as having their needs for health, food or shelter fulfilled. This helps us to frame concerns around dependency. The question is less whether people in desperate need should be assisted, and more whether the way in which they are assisted respects basic needs for autonomy, and enables people to exercise their capability for deliberation. The issue is how relief is provided, rather than how much is given.

Where aid makes up an important part of the survival strategies of people in emergencies, the question arises whether this aid can be depended upon, in the sense of people being able to rely on it. The transparency of assistance is therefore a key question. People can only reliably depend on assistance if they properly understand what they are entitled to, and when it is likely to be provided. Much of what is known about the targeting and delivery of relief assistance suggests

that relief aid is rarely transparent or regular enough to be relied upon. Early-warning systems and the responses that they trigger are seldom sophisticated enough to ensure that people in need of assistance will necessarily receive it.

In situations of acute risks to survival, aid agencies should be aiming to ensure that people are able to reliably depend on receiving assistance. Greater investment in transparency and accountability, greater efforts to encourage the active participation of affected populations, and complaint mechanisms might all help to address some of the negative consequences of relief assistance, which at the moment tend to be grouped under the umbrella term dependency. If relief can be relied on, then people will be better able to incorporate it productively into survival strategies.

Dependency and initiative

One of the meanings attached to dependency is the idea that the continued provision of relief risks creating a 'dependency mentality' or 'dependency syndrome', in which relief undermines initiative. All the evidence about how people survive during crises is that this is an unhelpful myth: relief does not undermine initiative or make people lazy. Recipients of aid are not passive recipients, but remain engaged in a wide variety of activities, of which aid forms only a part.

Views of dependency are also often linked to a belief among aid agency staff that recipients are not only lazy or uncooperative, but actively try to cheat the system. Seeing attempts to abuse relief systems as evidence of dependency puts the blame for abuse on those receiving the assistance, and is often taken as evidence that too much assistance is being provided. Of course, it would be equally possible to reach exactly the opposite conclusion, namely that attempts to cheat the system are evidence of need, and insufficient assistance. Perhaps a more useful way of viewing the

manipulation of relief would be to recognise that people are likely to exploit the aid on offer as fully as they can as part of their livelihood strategies.

The persistence of the idea of a dependency syndrome says more about the attitudes of aid providers towards recipients than it does about the attitudes of the recipients themselves. It is worth remembering how limited the interaction between humanitarians and recipients often is. People in desperate circumstances are likely to tell people in positions of power whatever they think they want to hear; as an Ethiopian proverb puts it, ‘When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts’.² In investigating dependency, therefore, we need to understand both the official discourse, how aid agencies view the people they are trying to help, and also, to the extent that we can, how people react to and resist the exercise of power. Using this perspective, the seemingly dependent recipient may be simply a ‘wise peasant bowing deeply’, and attempts to abuse the system may be the ‘fart’.

Dependency and disincentives

The term dependency is sometimes used as shorthand for a concern with the possible negative economic impacts of relief. The argument runs that prolonged relief assistance can undermine local economies, and that large amounts of food aid can damage local agricultural production. This in turn leads to a continuing need for relief assistance, creating a vicious cycle and trapping people into chronic dependency. This dependency trap argument is closely linked to a larger debate about the impact of food aid and its potential disincentive effects. The problem with this debate is that, despite a large literature, the evidence for or against disincentive effects remains inconclusive.

Another type of dependency trap relates to possible labour disincentives from participating in public works programmes. If a work requirement is attached to the receipt of relief, this may take scarce labour away from other key livelihood strategies, increasing the dependence on relief. But again, the evidence for this is limited and mixed.

The debate around disincentive effects has been distorted by its association with dependency. The possibility of disincentive effects, particularly around food aid, has been used as an argument for reducing relief entitlements, without necessarily any reference to whether the needs that prompted food aid in the first place have changed. If the need for relief still exists, then the possibility of disincentive effects may be a risk that is worth taking to ensure that people continue to receive vital assistance. Disincentive effects are an argument for looking at the appropriateness of the assistance being provided, not at whether it should be provided at all.

Dependency of governments and aid agencies

The dependency of governments or agencies is also generally portrayed in negative terms. Government officials feel that aid agencies are profiting from disasters, and aid officials argue that relief assistance has become embedded in corrupt or

neo-patrimonial political structures. But, as with beneficiary dependence, we argue that this is not necessarily the case. Governments whose capacities are overwhelmed in times of crisis, and which are unable to meet the basic needs of their citizens, should be able to depend on international support. Where governments are unable or unwilling to provide this support, aid agencies should be able to depend on receiving sufficient public and donor support to prevent large-scale mortality through the delivery of independent and impartial humanitarian relief. The problem therefore is not dependence *per se*, but the way in which this dependence is structured: for governments, whether dependence on relief is creating additional incentives for corruption; for aid agencies, whether the organisational interests created by relief resources are distorting the ways in which relief is delivered. For recipient countries, there may be strong vested interests in continuing relief assistance, both because of the potential financial benefits and because of the opportunities for patronage that it can present. Aid agencies too can be seen as dependent on continued relief programmes. Large aid bureaucracies can develop in responding to crises, with their own incentives for self-perpetuation.

Rethinking dependency

The concept of interdependency is helpful in reframing the debate around dependency in emergency relief. Rather than seeing dependency on relief as necessarily negative, we should be trying to understand the role that relief plays in the complex web of interdependencies that make up livelihoods under stress in crises. The many interdependencies that comprise a community’s social relations and people’s livelihoods may have both positive and negative aspects. Poor people may be trapped into exploitative economic relations, such as crippling debts, sharecropping arrangements or bonded labour. In a more positive sense, people may be able to depend on support from friends and relatives. External aid influences these existing patterns of social relations and, if it continues over a prolonged period, it may become embedded within them. It is also important to understand who is likely to be excluded from the interdependencies that make up communities and societies, and how exclusion may be influenced by factors such as gender or ethnicity.

As a concept, dependency reveals much about many of the attitudes and assumptions that underpin the ways in which humanitarian aid is delivered. This matters because the amount of relief that people receive has been reduced without justification, or because there has been a premature shift to developmental approaches.

This HPG Research Briefing is drawn from Paul Harvey and Jeremy Lind, *Dependency and Humanitarian Relief: A Critical Analysis*, HPG Report 19, July 2005.

The full report, and background papers looking in more detail at issues of dependency in Ethiopia and Kenya, are available from the ODI website at www.odi.org.uk/hpg/dependency.html.

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2 J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).