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About HPG

The Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute is Europe's leading team of independent policy researchers dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice in response to conflict, instability and disasters.

In brief

This note accompanies HPG Report No. 8 'Shifting Sands: The search for "coherence" between political and humanitarian responses to complex emergencies'. It presents the specific findings of research into the politics of coherence and the implications for humanitarian aid, in relation to the UK government. It is written principally for those with an interest in UK government policy. The full text of HPG Report number 8 can be found at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/appp/index.html>



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The Politics of Coherence: The UK government's approach to linking political and humanitarian responses to complex political emergencies

Introduction

This Research in Focus summarises the UK-specific findings of a study that examined the changing relationship between humanitarian and political responses to complex political emergencies (CPEs). The study focussed on two donor governments – the UK and the Netherlands – and on the United Nations. In addition, it looked at attempts to operationalise coherent humanitarian programming in Serbia, Macedonia and Afghanistan. At the end of the paper, the full project outputs are listed.

The search for coherence

Since the early 1990s there have been increasing calls to enhance the 'coherence' of political and humanitarian responses to conflict-induced emergencies. These calls have been driven by geopolitical factors, as well as by trends in aid policy and domestic public policy in donor countries.

Geopolitical factors

In the post Cold War period, there has been a softening of respect for absolute sovereignty. This has allowed greater intervention – economic, political and military – in the internal affairs of states. The redefinition of security to embrace economic, environmental and social aspects – 'human security' – has implied the inclusion of aid policy actors into the political domain of security. At the same time, aid actors have claimed increased legitimacy in scrutinising and seeking to influence the political landscape in recipient countries in order

to enhance aid effectiveness and promote a rights-based agenda.

Rethinking aid

The end of the Cold War meant that aid policy-makers needed to provide a new rationale to sustain aid flows. The late 1980s also saw a massive expansion in emergency aid flows. This was accompanied by increasing criticism of humanitarian aid. It was argued that, at best, relief was failing to address the root causes of populations' vulnerability; at worst, it was fuelling conflict.

By the early 1990s, the idea of 'aid as peace-maker' had emerged and this seemed to respond to both these problems. It proposed that aid could play an important role in the prevention and resolution of conflict. This approach was first adopted by what was then the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) in 1995, and underscored in the 1997 and 2000 White Papers.

Domestic public policy

Like many Western governments, the UK has promoted the idea of 'joined-up' government in recent years. This seeks to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public policy by cutting across traditional bureaucratic boundaries. Changes in the definition of party politics, the so-called 'Third Way', have been reflected in the foreign policy sphere. In particular, the advent of an ethical dimension to foreign policy has meant adopting the framework of good international citizenship. This implies promoting core values of liberal economic and political

policy internationally in order to protect national interests, eg. trade, control of drugs and refugee flows. Increasingly, states that do not share this framework are excluded from international relations, for example they are subject to economic and political sanctions, and are excluded from receiving aid.

Coherence redefined

In the early 1990s, the idea of a coherent response to CPEs implied mobilising political, military and economic assets in a cross-cutting effort to reduce violence and protect civilians. By the end of the decade, a more modest version of coherence prevailed: humanitarianism was to become the primary form of political engagement in CPEs.

UK policy and the new humanitarianism

A review of the evolution of UK policy in this area of policy suggests that it has followed the global trend towards a minimalist, humanitarian-led definition of coherence.

The creation of the Department for International Development (DFID) in 1997 provided not only for the autonomy of the aid programme, but for the Department to assume a much greater role as an international political actor in its own right.

Arguably, its success has been such that it has become the *de facto* Ministry for Unstrategic Countries, taking the lead in the definition and representation of UK policy at the geopolitical periphery.

At the same time, the trend towards selectivity of development assistance, common among many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and in line with the tenets of good international citizenship, has meant excluding some of the poorest countries from the primary tier of aid relations – partnership. This has left humanitarian action as the primary expression of UK international policy in conflict-affected areas of the South.

The objectives of UK humanitarian assistance had begun to broaden from the provision of palliative relief to include conflict reduction as early as 1995. The publication of DFID's ten humanitarian principles in 1998 signalled that there could be circumstances where the provision of relief could do more harm than good and therefore that *not* providing assistance could be the most humane course of action. This approach sought to codify the approach that had been applied controversially in Sierra Leone in 1997.

The creation of the Conflict and Humanitarian Aid Department (CHAD) in 1998 was the administrative expression of the move towards integrating humanitarian and conflict management objectives. In addition to its policy advisory function, the new department had an operational role in countries not covered by geographical desks. In these countries, CHAD played a significant role not only in funding relief, but also interacting with political bodies, such as the Security Council.

Delivering the integrated model of coherence has demanded new ways of working. In common with other countries, there has been a bilateralisation of the UK's humanitarian response. This has included:

- promotion of and participation in donor humanitarian coordination bodies such as the Afghan Support Group;
- closer scrutiny of the working practices of partner

- organisations, eg. through the development of Institutional Strategy Papers, and through analysis of conditions prevailing in specific countries;
- establishment of field offices.

The increasing proximity of a donor government to the field has raised concerns among operational agencies that the independence of humanitarian action, necessary to maintain neutrality, is being undermined.

By 1999 the tension between conflict management objectives and humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality were acknowledged. Also recognised was the fact that the pursuit of policy coherence risked glossing over potentially legitimate conflicts in the mandates of different departments, specifically between DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). It was therefore important to define clearly their comparative advantages and rules to govern their interaction.

By late 1999/2000 the beginnings of a 'new, new humanitarianism' began to emerge, characterised by:

- clearer separation of the conflict management and humanitarian assistance roles of CHAD;
- a focus on whether the conditions for effective relief aid are in place.

This shift is significant, recognising that integration of conflict and humanitarian objectives creates both ethical and practical problems. Ethically, conflating these objectives implied allocating emergency aid resources according to political criteria, not according to need. This is similar to asking ambulance-men to decide whether the road accident victim is deserving or not.

However, there is little evidence that aid can provide significant leverage over the course of conflict dynamics. There is thus a risk of compromising humanitarian values, without any real promise of significant political gain. The UK experience in this respect is echoed by a major Development Assistance Committee (DAC) study (Uvin, 1999) on the role of aid in conflict management.

The shape of the 'new, new humanitarianism' has yet to be outlined in a definitive policy statement. Clarification of the position might usefully tackle the perceived risk that the new emphasis on conditions for effective and accountable humanitarian action, is political conditionality in disguise.

Ensuring that this interpretation is misplaced will require ensuring that scrutiny of conditions is applied evenly across countries, using rigorous and transparent methodologies. It will also require analysis of who is best able to collect and analyse such information – a government department or independent humanitarian actors?

Conclusions and recommendations

During the late 1990s, the interpretation of the coherence agenda in the UK has promoted an approach that integrated humanitarian and conflict reduction objectives. Experience suggests that this has proved problematic ethically and technically. Most importantly, such integration requires compromising the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality. There are indications that DFID policy is moving towards a position of clearer separation of these two functions. This is to be welcomed. Experience from other contexts suggests that it would be useful

to codify the terms under which humanitarian assistance is provided. It is recommended that:

- the proposed International Development Act defines humanitarian assistance, emphasising its impartial and independent character.

The tendency towards an integrationist interpretation of the coherence agenda has been driven in significant part by the withdrawal of other diplomatic and developmental actors from conflict-affected countries. This withdrawal has been justified by arguments to do with aid effectiveness and good international citizenship that have assumed shared values across the international community. However, it is precisely in those countries where those in authority do not share the values of 'liberal peace' that the need for political and economic assistance is likely to be most acute. It is recommended that:

- the FCO reviews the extent of its capacity for engagement in conflicts in non-strategic countries, including its support for multilateral political action. As part of this review, analysis of the models of contemporary conflict and of diplomatic engagement in these conflicts would be useful;
- that DFID, in the context of its White Paper on globalisation, undertakes a wide-ranging review of the aid instruments it deploys in conflict-affected countries, and the terms and conditions under which it might use developmental tools to engage with state and non-state actors in these environments.

The trend towards bilateralisation of humanitarian policy has been driven in part by legitimate concern regarding the performance and accountability of humanitarian actors. However, there is little evidence that, of itself, bilateralisation will overcome these problems. Instead, there is a considerable risk, that it contributes to the actual and perceived 'politicisation' of humanitarian assistance and undermines independent and multilateral action. It is therefore recommended that:

- DFID, possibly in collaboration with other donors and selected operational partners, reviews the global trend towards bilateralisation of humanitarian assistance and its implications;
- DFID continues to support initiatives that aim to enhance the accountability and performance of humanitarian action through other, independent means. These include: independent monitoring, the Humanitarian Accountability Project and Sphere. It is not recommended that DFID make its funding to operational agencies conditional upon their participation in such mechanisms, however.

An important indicator of the impartiality of official humanitarian assistance is the ability to demonstrate that it is distributed according to need. It is therefore recommended that:

- as a crude indicator of impartiality, DFID publishes annual figures showing relief spending per capita in countries assisted;
- DFID should also encourage the DAC to develop more sensitive methodologies to correlate humanitarian aid spending with need.

The creation of DFID raises the issue of UK representation on humanitarian affairs worldwide. This study therefore recommends:

- reviewing existing arrangements for UK representation on humanitarian affairs in key humanitarian centres such as New York and Geneva to ensure that they reflect the required technical expertise and shared concepts of humanitarianism.

Related publications

Macrae J and N Leader (2000) 'Shifting Sands: The search for coherence between political and humanitarian action', *HPG Report No 8*, Overseas Development Institute, London.

Macrae J and N Leader (2000) 'The Politics of Coherence: humanitarianism and foreign policy in the post-Cold War era', *HPG Briefing 1*, Overseas Development Institute, London

Macrae J (2000) 'The monopolitics of humanitarian intervention: Defining the aid-politics boundary', Notes for an ODI seminar 31 May 2000

Leader N and J Macrae (2000) 'Terms of engagement: conditions, conditionality and humanitarian assistance. Report on an ODI/Henry Dunant Centre Working Meeting 3-4 May', *HPG Report No 6*, Overseas Development Institute, London.

Macrae J and N Leader (2000) 'The new International Development Act: the case for definition of humanitarian assistance', Briefing Note for a meeting of DFID officials/members of the International Development Committee, ODI 27 January 2000.

Macrae J (2000) 'Oil... and Water: political and humanitarian intervention in the Serbian energy sector', *Relief and Rehabilitation Network Newsletter 16*, Overseas Development Institute, London

Leader N and J Macrae (2000) 'Whose side are the humanitarians on?' *The Politician*, July 2000.

Reference

Uvin P (1999) 'The Influence of Aid in Situations of Violent Conflict.' A synthesis report prepared for the DAC informal Task Force on Conflict, Peace and Development, OECD/DAC, Paris.

Further information about the Coherence Study and related work is available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/appp/index.html> or from hpgadmin@odi.org.uk. The authors can be contacted at these email addresses: j.macrae@odi.org.uk and nicholasleader@hotmail.com