

'Aid in chronic political emergencies'

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Introduction

The need for aid funding to address crises and emergencies is increasing. The purpose of this piece is to set out the case for greater humanitarian assistance and forms of assistance in situations of chronic political instability.

The last twenty years has seen a record expansion in humanitarian assistance budgets in real terms and as a share of oda. In 1980, the international community spent US\$2556 million on humanitarian assistance. By 1999 this had more than doubled to US\$4538 million, over 11% of total official development assistance. Given this massive expansion in humanitarian aid over the past decade, why do we need more aid targeted at chronic political emergencies?

Aid alone is not enough in these situations. Again and again, history reminds us that effective political engagement is required to reduce the extreme vulnerability of those affected by war and the breakdown of governance. However, evidence also shows that appropriately provided, international assistance can serve to reduce death and suffering and protect people's dignity. What is also emerging is a pattern of significant under-funding of humanitarian assistance in conflict situations, particularly in those emergencies that are out of the international spotlight. What is also increasingly apparent is the need to develop new forms of assistance to provide principled support to communities facing chronic insecurity. This paper calls for an increase in international support to conflict-affected countries, underwritten by clear policy objectives and a statutory commitment for such aid to respect international humanitarian law.

The context

Around the world more than one in every 280 people is either a refugee, returnee or displaced person. More than half of all sub-Saharan African countries have been affected by violent conflict in the past two decades; the eleven most war-torn countries have the highest incidence of poverty and lowest HDI on the continent. An estimated one-fifth of

Africans now live in countries severely disrupted by conflict. The UN currently identifies 55 countries around the globe where conditions of conflict are generating major emergencies.

'Poor performers' against criteria of governance, poverty alleviation and economic reform, the countries in which these people live are largely excluded from the mainstream of development assistance, and indeed conventional international relations more broadly. In these contexts, home to some of the poorest and most vulnerable populations on the planet, humanitarian assistance is often the primary form of assistance available.

Humanitarian aid expenditure has increased sharply since the mid-1980s, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of total aid. In 1980 under US\$500 million, just over 2.5% of aid, was allocated to emergency relief. By 1999 this had risen to US\$1.3 billion or 11.3% of aid. While the appearance is one of increased generosity, as a proportion of donor's wealth, humanitarian aid spending has gone down by 30%.

There are three major weaknesses in existing data regarding humanitarian aid that suggest caution is required in interpreting the figures:

- **It is very difficult to match spending with need**
Donors are increasingly earmarking their contributions to high profile crises, such as those in the Balkans and currently Afghanistan. This means that despite large increases in overall humanitarian aid spending, there remain major gaps in funding in 'forgotten emergencies'. So for example, of the top fifty humanitarian recipient states by total volume over 1996-9, the top five were political hot spots in the Balkans, Iraq and Israel. The next five were all low-income countries: Rwanda, Sudan, Afghanistan, Angola and Indonesia. The total volume for these five was US\$1.4 billion, half the total of the top five (US\$2.75 billion). Concentration of aid in one place means reduction in entitlements in others. Aid agencies

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are routinely reducing their budgets and adjusting their appeals, in so-called forgotten emergencies while, in cases such as Kosovo during 1999 finding projects to match funds proved difficult.

- **'Humanitarian', rehabilitation and development aid remain poorly defined**

It is difficult to gain accurate data regarding how aid funds are allocated between different activities. The broadening of the definition of emergency relief to include large-scale rehabilitation and small-scale conflict management programmes means that it is unclear what proportion of 'humanitarian' assistance is being spent on meeting basic needs of conflict-affected populations. It also remains the case that a number of OECD members include the money they spend supporting refugees at home as official development aid. Between 1992 and 1999 some US\$7 billion of assistance was spent in this way. In other cases, what is clearly relief work is being reported as 'development'. In countries such as Somalia, levels of malnutrition and mortality that were once seen to necessitate emergency interventions are now recast as normal. Despite persistent insecurity, one person's emergency is another's development opportunity.

- **In some countries emergency aid spending includes support to refugees in donor countries themselves**

Between 1992 and 1999 US\$7 billion in aid was spent in this way. Funds allocated to international assistance are subsidising domestic public policy responsibilities.

Thus, behind the headline figure of a massive increase in humanitarian aid spending, what we really have is a situation whereby humanitarian aid is being stretched to meet more and more goals internationally and in donor countries. Globally, a significant humanitarian deficit is thus emerging.

In plugging this deficit, a number of priorities emerge:

- **To reassert a commitment to impartial and neutral humanitarian assistance**

It is unacceptable that some populations remain unable to access sufficient food, water and shelter just because they are affected by the 'wrong type' of war. Prior to September 11th the international community contributed less than 50% of the funds the UN estimated to be required to meet the basic needs of the Afghan people in the seven years 1992–9. In the aftermath of the terrible events since then, a deluge of funds has been released. Turning the funding tap off and on according to political context ignores the ethical and legal basis of humanitarian action that emphasises allocating resources

on the basis of need, irrespective of race, creed or indeed the strategic significance of the country to Western donors.

- **To enhance the predictability of financing in the humanitarian sphere**

In contrast to development assistance, humanitarian agencies remain almost entirely dependent on voluntary contributions in response to global or country-specific appeals. Most of the 'emergencies' confronting the humanitarian system are chronic: they have lasted for years, even decades. Yet the funding cycles for humanitarian assistance remain very short-term – on average 3–12 months.

The 'humanitarian system' – UN, NGOs and the Red Cross Movement – remain highly dependent for their funding on a relatively small number of donor governments. Combined, these two factors serve to make the resourcing of humanitarian action very unpredictable, both in terms of volume and targeting of resources. Some donor governments, including the UK, are moving towards multi-year funding, but differences remain in terms of the degree of earmarking of such funds.

- **To develop other aid and political instruments to support populations in conflict-affected countries**

In recent years, politicians have looked increasingly to aid to provide solutions to the seemingly intractable problem of violence in the developing world. This pressure is likely to intensify in the aftermath of the events of autumn 2001. The steady withdrawal of diplomatic and development actors from many conflict-affected countries has left humanitarian aid increasingly alone to solve multiple problems. This situation is neither sustainable nor effective. New diplomatic and aid tools need to be developed that can make principled and effective contributions to meeting basic needs and securing sustainable peace in these 'poorly performing' countries.

This paper draws on a variety of current Humanitarian Policy Group work. In particular, data are drawn from a paper prepared by Judith Randel (2002) *Financing humanitarian action: a review of trends*, which will appear in Spring 2002 as part of a project to monitor trends in international humanitarian action. Further information about this project will be available at in late March 2002 at www.odi.org.uk/hpg/

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