



The Consortium of British
Humanitarian Agencies

Suggestions for the inception of the DFID Humanitarian Emergency Response Review

14th September, 2010

The Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA), a DFID-supported collaboration by 15 leading UK non-governmental organisations, fully supports the Government's efforts to reflect upon the UK's contribution to international humanitarian action. The forthcoming review of DFID's humanitarian work is an important opportunity in this regard, and the Consortium appreciates the openness of the Review Team to engage with the 'third pillar'. Here are seven initial considerations.

1. Scope of the review

It would be important to reflect upon the scope of the review to ensure it sufficiently addresses the range of issues at stake, while also protecting the important and recondite international framework for humanitarian action. After decades of experience, the humanitarian system has developed a comprehensive perspective on the actions required to protect vulnerable people before, during and after humanitarian crisis events. A review of the impact of DFID's humanitarian policy cannot be answered by looking at emergency response on its own. Surely it must also look at the other aspects of DFID's engagement such as development programming to assess the comparative benefits of its humanitarian engagement. Moreover, the concern is how adequately reviews of bilateral and multilateral aid will address the full range of humanitarian crisis contexts to which the system responds. A fragmented approach may not produce the insight which the UK deserves and needs.

At the same time, we must all recognize that the international normative framework for humanitarian action is a political subject. The risk in addressing a political subject with a technical evaluation in this instance would be a re-emergence of traditional criticisms about humanitarian action failing to deliver development targets, peace, stability, good governance and all the other things it isn't designed to do. Would the appropriate questions therefore be about how effective, relevant and efficient can DFID be in upholding normative standards of humanitarian assistance? That said: if the political questions were indeed on the table, then it would be important to consider gaps in the contemporary international legal framework for humanitarian action.

Fundamentally therefore the issue is about how one defines the purpose of the UK's international humanitarian efforts. It would be useful to explicitly explore how issues of security, leadership, development and humanitarian aid are interlinked. It is accepted that the scope and complexity of present and future humanitarian crises demands a multi-agency response from all sectors: political, humanitarian, military and commercial. The question is how to best meet the UK's interests in today's interconnected and politically literate world. To what degree can UK national security interests can be met by promoting

the existing humanitarian framework and system? Is greater political-military-humanitarian coherence succeeding in delivering a better world for our children?

The consortium believes it equally fundamental to recognize the complexity of humanitarian action. Simple metrics may be misleading as well as appealing. For example, while it would be easy to identify and report on the size of the affected population in a crisis, it is more important to understand how they perceive their needs, and whether they perceive the assistance to be appropriate. Also, at a technical level, the assessment of humanitarian impact requires investment in preparedness for doing good assessments; engagement with recipient governments and development actors on this agenda; and investment in effective coordination in order to get a proper picture of needs. Finally, at an institutional level, it is important to ensure cross-fertilization and linkages between the multilateral, bilateral, defense and the humanitarian review.

2. When does an international crisis trigger a UK government response?

It would be important to reflect upon how a crisis is defined within DFID, the sources of information which DFID uses to inform its opinion, when a situation merits a response, and whether the decision process is efficient and effective. The memory is still fresh of the international community's slow and inadequate response to the crisis in Niger in the summer of 2005. While the role of the media is well understood, the degree to which early warning capacity exists, and how this capacity translates into early action, is less well understood. In a similar vein, it would be useful to consider the relationships between risk reduction, early response, mitigation, and preparedness. To what degree is DRR sufficiently integrated into UK humanitarian and development policy and practice?

3. Value for money and impact

In an era where humanitarian needs exceed available resources, it is important to remember that those most in need of humanitarian assistance are often the most difficult and most expensive to reach. Cost effectiveness therefore should not be measured simply according to the number of people who receive assistance, or speed of financial disbursement, but based on a commitment to reach vulnerable people with appropriate and effective assistance. This is particularly important in fragile states and complex political emergencies.

It would be also useful to consider the relative cost effectiveness of the different DFID financial disbursement channels, particularly in examining how funding is allocated amongst the 'three pillars'. A frank analysis of how each pillar provides value for money, efficiency and humanitarian impact would help drive improvements at home and abroad.

4. The role of humanitarian independence in producing better humanitarian outcomes

The principles of humanitarian action have emerged from a long history of experience in politically sensitive environments, and are enshrined in international legal instruments. Particularly since September 11th 2001, the impartiality of humanitarian aid has been eroded. This has led to considerable debate and polarisation within the humanitarian system. This review would make a useful contribution to that debate by considering the role of independent (humanitarian) organisations in producing better outcomes for affected populations.

5. The role of international collaboration in producing better humanitarian outcomes

In our interconnected 21st Century world, it would be impossible to accurately reflect upon a single country's humanitarian work without reflecting upon how that country fits into the whole international humanitarian system. For example, will the review take into consideration: evaluations of the cluster approach, UN reform, the views of ECHO, consideration of the EU as a political actor, local-led responses and structures, southern-based informants, other donor actions, and international trends towards greater politicisation of aid? It would be critical that this humanitarian review connects with, and learns from several currently active humanitarian reviews in other donor countries.

6. Accountability and bureaucracy

Aid effectiveness and value for money are issues which are greatly influenced by the bureaucratic systems of the institutions that comprise the humanitarian system. The cascade of bureaucracy through the chain of organisations in the international humanitarian system may have contributed to lessening and diluting the impact of the UK's contribution. The question for the review is whether HMG's (legitimate) accountability requirements have been implemented efficiently or effectively. In the right circumstances, would not increased trust between donor and implementing partner result in more innovation, appropriateness and efficiency? The CBHA values its mature relationship with DFID, and would be happy to discuss how it is leading to better humanitarian outcomes.

7. Sources of information and opinion for the review

Finally it is self-evident that this review intends to influence the future of the UK's humanitarian contribution, and thus it might usefully consider the world in which that future contribution will be made. There is a danger in reflecting exclusively on historical material, and most organisations would argue that a lot has changed since the international response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami.

With thanks for this opportunity, and in anticipation of a rich and fruitful dialogue ahead