Tackling the humanitarian-development divide

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Tackling the humanitarian-development divide

A policy briefing by Dr Paul Hopper

Summary

This policy briefing investigates the divergent approaches of the global humanitarian and development sectors towards contemporary challenges like population displacement, state fragility and civil war. It highlights the extent to which this policy divergence is often unnecessary and counter-productive. The policy briefing concludes by exploring ways in which we can move beyond this policy divide in order to achieve more effective and coordinated responses to contemporary crises.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

**DRC**: Democratic Republic of Congo  
**MSF**: Médecins Sans Frontières  
**HLP**: High-Level Panel  
**NGOs**: non-governmental organisations  
**ODA**: official development assistance  
**UNHCR**: UN Refugee Agency  
**WHS**: World Humanitarian Summit
Introduction

This policy briefing investigates what has been termed ‘the humanitarian-development divide’ that stems largely from the different approaches and motivations of the two sectors. Critics contend that this division has led to unnecessary competition between these policy areas to the detriment of the very people in need of assistance.

The purpose of this policy briefing is twofold. Firstly, it will seek to show that the humanitarian-development divide is particularly inappropriate given how conflict has evolved and become more protracted in the recent period largely as a result of societal discord and state fragility. Secondly, it will explore ways in which we can move beyond this divide in order to achieve more integrated policy responses to contemporary crises.
The humanitarian-development divide

Humanitarianism seeks to save lives and alleviate human suffering through emergency responses to natural disasters and conflicts by ensuring ready access to essentials like food, water, health care and shelter.

In contrast, development is oriented towards the longer-term goal of attempting to change or reshape developing societies, especially in relation to achieving poverty reduction. Indeed, from a development perspective, aspects of humanitarianism can potentially hinder this goal. For example, when humanitarian action involves importing large amounts of food into a region it can undercut local producers who cannot compete with free food. In turn, this harms the economic development of the country receiving humanitarian assistance.

For humanitarians, changing or reshaping a society is a secondary concern. This is because the vast majority of humanitarian needs are generated by conflict, and humanitarians working in the field must be viewed by the warring parties as neutral – as simply there to help people – and not implementing a wider (potentially political) agenda of stabilizing a state and facilitating economic development. Moreover, humanitarian agencies occasionally express concern that the integration of development and peace-building approaches into disaster relief dilutes the humanitarian impulse.
The division between the two sectors was highlighted at the first World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) that was held in Istanbul in May 2016. Prior to the summit, the international humanitarian agency *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) withdrew in protest at what they regarded as the attempt by the former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to merge humanitarianism and development with the focus on ending need (development) rather than delivering aid (humanitarianism).

The former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (front right) with Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (front centre), President of the Federal Republic of Somalia, during the World Humanitarian Summit held in Istanbul, 23-24 May, 2016. (Source: © United Nations 2016)
The distinction between development and humanitarianism has come to inform policy-making circles and approaches. For instance, some NGOs, international agencies and aid donors are more geared to one policy area than the other. Moreover, even within organizations that contain both development and humanitarian sectors there are often claims that the different parts are not working together effectively and coordinating their activity.

A view of the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan, 27 March 2017. In 2017, nearly 80,000 Syrian refugees were living in the camp. (Source: © United Nations 2017)
Criticism of the humanitarian-development divide

Critics of the humanitarian-development divide contend that dealing with some crises requires seeing the linkages between humanitarianism and development and coordinating policy responses accordingly.

For example, assisting refugees inevitably generates a humanitarian response. However, simply relying on this approach will not necessarily ease their plight and may lead to long-term displacement and dependency on humanitarian assistance. Consequently, it may also require the implementation of development strategies, such as infrastructural investment to help to rebuild their countries of origin and revive their economies. These measures are often necessary if the underlying causes of their displacement are to be addressed, such as trying to heal fractured societies in order to prevent conflict resurfacing.

Akcakale, Syrian refugee camp

[Image of a refugee camp]
Development, humanitarianism and contemporary conflict

The debate about the relationship between development and humanitarianism is being shaped by the changing nature of conflict. The latter phenomenon is reflected in the rise in the number of complex emergencies, which tend to be protracted civil wars as opposed to interstate wars. Moreover, many of these conflicts spill-over into neighbouring states leading to regional instability, state fragility and population displacement. Under such conditions it is difficult to implement development approaches. It also affects the nature of humanitarian work, drawing humanitarian agencies into conflicts as is evident with the growing number of attacks on aid and medical workers.

The protracted nature of many contemporary crises makes it difficult to continue to classify them as ‘emergencies’ that can be addressed by annual fund-raising appeals. For example, countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia and Sudan have received humanitarian funding for decades rather than years. Indeed, when humanitarian work continues year after year it raises the issue of when the focus should turn to development. For instance, in refugee camps that have been established for decades, educational facilities, infrastructural projects and other forms of economic development should perhaps be prioritized.
The greater amount of time spent dealing with complex emergencies invariably escalates the costs of humanitarian action. It presents donors with ever increasing financial demands, which is reflected in the UN launching its largest ever appeals for humanitarian funding in recent years. Indeed, global humanitarian financing has risen from $2billion in 2000 to $28billion in 2015 (Development Initiatives, 2016; see Figure 1). Yet in spite of this increase, the scale of the humanitarian challenge created by some regional conflicts – Syria is an obvious example – is placing considerable pressure upon the international community. There is a growing funding gap between demand and resources, especially with the number of displaced people globally continuing to rise. It is estimated that donors are now only able to contribute around 50-60 per cent of the funding needed for humanitarian aid each year (Bennett, 2015: 5).

![Figure 1: International Humanitarian Response, 2000-2015](https://www.fpoglobal.com)
Tackling the humanitarian-development divide

How are we to meet the considerable challenges outlined in the previous section? In addressing this question, a number of ideas and proposals will now be examined that can be categorized under three broad headings:

1. Engaging development in humanitarian crises

As indicated above, there is a need to move beyond the humanitarian-development divide, especially in the context of increasingly complex crises linked to conflict, fragile states, and population displacement. Development strategies ranging from building schools and hospitals to investing in economic infrastructure and job creation can contribute to societal stabilization and poverty eradication diminishing the likelihood of humanitarian disasters in the future. At the very least they can minimize the effects of humanitarian disasters and reduce the prospect of them becoming protracted in nature. Moreover, the costs for the international community to intervene in these types of crisis are far greater than if it works on long-term projects that are designed to ensure that they never surface in the first place. Given the rising costs of humanitarian emergency assistance there is a need to think long-term about these matters, and development approaches can help to build the resilience of communities.
Hassan Shan camp in northern Iraq, 31 March 2017. The camp was opened by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in November 2016 to help accommodate people displaced from Mosul. (Source: © United Nations 2017)

2. The localization of humanitarian assistance

One way to bridge the humanitarian-development divide is that rather than viewing this policy area as an either/or issue – in which either the immediacy of humanitarianism or longer-term development goals take precedent – it is local conditions and the specific challenges that are faced which should determine policy responses on a case-by-case basis. In other words, it is the particular nature of the crisis, conflict or natural disaster as well as the local environment that should shape the approach to policy-making (Darcy, 2008; White and Cliffe, 2000). In short, a contextualizing approach is required.

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The localization of humanitarian assistance is an area that is generating growing interest within the humanitarian and development sectors. It can include measures ranging from donor governments working directly with civil society organizations on the ground to training local first responders to humanitarian disasters who can complement the actions of international relief workers, and help to build the resilience of their communities. The ultimate form of localized humanitarian assistance are cash transfers. It entails the provision of direct cash transfers to those in need of assistance so that they have flexibility of choosing how best to meet their own needs rather than simply receiving food and other forms of aid. Moreover, as well as supporting livelihoods, cash can potentially contribute to local economies.

Imvepi Refugee Settlement in Arua District, Northern Uganda, 19 June, 2017. In February 2017, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and partners opened this new settlement area in Arua district, northern Uganda in order to host thousands of refugees arriving from South Sudan. In the photo new arrivals are waiting to be assigned to different zones within the camp. (Source: © United Nations 2017)
3. **Funding humanitarianism and development**

As with official development assistance (ODA) or aid, most funding for humanitarian relief comes from governments with much of it channelled through the UN, which is then allocated to partner agencies like NGOs that implement the programmes. However, as we have seen, the relationship between humanitarian and development assistance is perhaps starting to blur in the context of contemporary crises. In response to the shifting aid landscape there are growing calls for blended finance or grants. The thinking behind this initiative is that it would necessitate the relevant agencies formulating strategies that acknowledged the complex nature of contemporary emergencies by synthesizing humanitarian, peace-building and development approaches, and moving beyond the humanitarian-development divide.

There are also calls for the formation of a global fund for humanitarian assistance. It has been proposed that a global financial mechanism for humanitarianism could replicate the global funds that exist to tackle climate change and infectious diseases (see Davies, 2016). Moreover, global funds provide a way of publicizing their respective causes. Indeed, this type of fund can attract finance from a range of sources (from governments to private donors), and thereby help to ensure that it retains considerable autonomy by not being beholden to a single donor. In fact, the amount of money that some global funds have been able to raise gives them influence and a degree of political clout. This authority is necessary to develop flexible responses to humanitarian disasters, to coordinate resource allocations, and to be able to stand-up to different tiers of authority within states.
Most importantly, the size of global funds and the governance bodies which run them are arguably the most suitable institutional arrangements for dealing with the scale of contemporary protracted crises.

More broadly, in the context of the widening gap between humanitarian needs and available resources, there is an ongoing push to diversify sources of humanitarian funding, especially by appealing more actively to the private sector. This was one of the key recommendations of the report to the United-Nations Secretary General by the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing (2016), *Too important to fail – addressing the humanitarian financing gap*. The report called for reform of the aid system advocating greater transparency and new sources of multi-year funding involving less earmarking, including micro-levies on corporations, a voluntary solidarity levy for governments, and increased use of social impact bonds and Islamic social finance.

Another factor that will potentially shape the funding of humanitarianism in the future is the rise in local giving in the South. It is a consequence of the rapid economic development in parts of the Global South, with a number of wealthy philanthropists emerging keen to invest their own countries. There has also been a growth of community philanthropy in the South with the number of community foundations increasing by 86 per cent between 2000 and 2010 (Global Fund for Community Foundations, 2014). This approach utilizes local resources, skills and knowledge in setting-up different forms of community development.
Imvepi Refugee Settlement in Arua District, Northern Uganda, 19 June, 2017. The registration area of Imvepi settlement, where new arrivals are assigned to different zones within the camp. (Source: © United Nations 2017)
Conclusion

Finally, it is important to recognize that any attempt to revise the relationship between development and humanitarianism in order to improve our collective response to protracted crises, will not be doing so in a social and political vacuum. More specifically, any ideas and proposals in this area will have to confront a more uncertain climate as a result of the rise in populist and nationalist sentiment that appears instinctively wary of international institutions, global campaigns and spending on overseas aid.

References


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