Crises in a New World Order

Challenging the humanitarian project

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A woman collects water in Lafole, Somalia, supplied by Oxfam & SAACID. Photo: Oxfam Novib

In 2010, vast humanitarian crises from Haiti to Pakistan almost overwhelmed the international system's ability to respond. Despite years of reform, UN agencies, donors, and international NGOs (INGOs) struggled to cope. In 2011, Somalia yet again saw a response too little and too late, driven by media attention, not a timely, impartial assessment of human needs. At the same time, humanitarian action is needed now more than ever. The growing number of vulnerable people, the rise in disasters, and the failure to put most fragile states on the path to development, will significantly increase needs.

Western-based donors, INGOs and the UN provide only part of the answer. Already, new donors and NGOs from around the world provide a significant share of humanitarian aid. Future humanitarian action will rely on them, and on the governments and civil society of crisis-affected countries, even more. The UN and INGOs will be vital, but their contribution will increasingly be measured by how well they complement and support the efforts of others, and encourage every humanitarian actor to uphold humanitarian principles.

Summary

Tens of millions of people suffer in today's humanitarian crises. In East Africa alone, over 13 million have faced a devastating food crisis.

But millions of people also *help* their neighbours, families and communities. In Pakistan, neighbours, communities and local NGOs were once again first with relief when floods struck in 2011, just as they had been in 2010, when aid agencies struggled to reach the 14 million in need of assistance.

Much still to do

Twenty years ago, the UN General Assembly recognized that it was the crisis-affected state, not international agencies, that had the 'primary role in … humanitarian assistance'[1] when it passed the resolution in December, 1991, that charted a new course for humanitarian action, and set up what became today's Office for Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Since then, the UN and other agencies have saved millions of lives. In 2005, Emergency Relief Co-ordinator Jan Egeland launched a package of reforms to improve UN leadership, co-ordination, and the funding of humanitarian responses.

But, seven years later, international humanitarian action is still too little or too late, especially when crises fail to grip the world media's attention. It still cannot cope with multiple 'mega-disasters', like Pakistan or Haiti, or the demand that will grow as the number of weather-related disasters increase and fewer conflicts are resolved.

UN leadership and co-ordination is inconsistent. Too little international aid makes the most of its impact by working with local organizations on the ground. In many countries, there is also a growing sentiment against Western-based humanitarian agencies.

In large part, the future of humanitarian action lies not in the North, but in the diverse array of local, national, and regional authorities, and civil society and religious organizations in the countries where conflicts continue and disasters strike. Building their capacity must be central to humanitarian action, as capacity building has been in development for years.

At the moment, the capacity of crisis-affected countries is enormously varied. Some states are increasingly effective in preparing for and responding to emergencies. They are conscious of their responsibilities to their citizens and are willing to meet them. But in almost every region, some governments lack the necessary capacity or use what they have in a partisan way.

Civil society is also enormously varied and has faced both successes and failures in building its capacity further. The combination of the effective state and active civil society is too often absent in countries vulnerable to crises. Meeting the challenge to build both is essential for effective emergency response and to build communities' resilience to the disasters, violence, and other shocks they may face.

A disaster occurring during the Olympics must have three times as many fatalities as a disaster on an ordinary day to have equal chance of receiving US relief.

World Bank (2010)[2]

In 2009, only 1.9 per cent of donor government funds to NGOs went to organizations based in disaster-affected countries.

Development Initiatives (2011)[3]

Against this background, the UN and international NGOs (INGOs) will be as vital as ever. But their contribution will increasingly be measured by how they complement and support the capacities and efforts of crisis-affected countries.

In some countries, INGOs' operations will be needed for years. But in others, their impact will rest on becoming 'humanitarian brokers': facilitating, supporting, and bringing together local civil society. To achieve this, INGOs, including Oxfam, face five major challenges to overcoming the difficulties inherent in improving humanitarian action.

The international humanitarian sector remains trapped in the notion that we *need to be the ones saving all the lives. As a community, we are unprepared to assume the new increasing demands due to climate change. We must build up and support other key local actors who can multiply our effective impact.*

J. Ocharan and M. Delaney (2011)[4]

Key challenges

The key challenges for INGOs are to:
- build the capacity of states and civil society while making difficult judgements on how to work with states with varying capacities and commitments to humanitarian principles, and finding vastly different civil society capacity;
- build communities' resilience to cope with disasters, climate change, violence, and economic and political shocks, while maintaining the operational capacity to respond when needed;
- encourage states and others to uphold humanitarian principles, while learning from non-Western agencies how to implement them in different contexts, and recognizing that ethical humanitarian action demands upholding principles *and* making difficult judgements based on the consequences of different courses of action;
- encourage new and different sources of funding and action from emerging economies, private companies, and others, while encouraging them to uphold humanitarian principles, and respond to needs wherever they are;
- strengthen the quality and accountability of INGOs, including through some form of certification of effective humanitarian action, while recognizing the value of diverse and varied humanitarian agencies.

None of the challenges are easy. Oxfam and others are learning how to meet them. It will take years, in places decades, to build genuinely global humanitarian action, rooted in crisis-affected countries.

But the successes and failures of past crises do point to the following lessons. Some of them will be difficult to implement. But they are vital to improving humanitarian aid in the often dangerous and always difficult circumstances in which it is given.

Recommendations

This paper recommends that:

Every actor involved in humanitarian aid should:

- deliver aid impartially, independently, and based on assessed needs;
- strive to be sensitive to the vulnerabilities of gender, age, and disability;
- be more accountable to those who have been affected;
- put a greater focus on building local capacity and on disaster risk reduction;
- make timely and appropriate responses to warnings of disaster; and
- when faced with difficult dilemmas, make transparent decisions based on the best possible judgement on the consequences of different courses of action.

Crisis-affected governments should:

- do all they can to generate the will and resources to reinforce emergency preparedness and response capacities, with legislation and early warning triggers to generate an immediate principled response;
- deliver social protection programmes to meet the needs of vulnerable people, and increase their resilience; and
- ensure equal access to all essential services – including health, education, justice, and security – to help build resilience to violence.

Regional organizations should:

- develop their capacity to support national governments; and
- if necessary, catalyse them into action.

OECD and emerging donor governments should:

- focus an increasing proportion of their funding on building affected governments' capacity, and treat this as a key indicator of aid;
- double the proportion of total aid dedicated to reduce the risk of disasters; and
- strive to increase resilience to violence in fragile states.

INGOs should:

- put a greater focus on building local capacity and on disaster risk reduction, in order to gradually reduce operational responses where local capacity is sufficient;
- advocate and respond immediately to warnings of disasters;
- depending on the state, they should strive to combine strong advocacy for humanitarian principles with respect for the state's vital role; and

The important humanitarian shift is in our investment in organizations beyond Oxfam, more strategically than ever before.

S. Springett, East Asia Humanitarian Co-ordinator, Oxfam GB (2011)

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- where appropriate, strengthen their humanitarian identity to distinguish themselves from other actors, developing some form of certification to show that agencies meet a standard of effective, efficient, impartial, and timely humanitarian action, including genuine partnership with local organizations.

The **UN** should:

- ensure a strong Humanitarian Co-ordinator in every crisis;
- redouble its efforts to improve its humanitarian leadership, wherever possible in partnership with the affected state; and
- maintain a 'firewall' between political and peacekeeping functions and humanitarian operations, even in integrated missions.

All parties to armed conflicts must:

- allow civilians access to whatever humanitarian aid they need and protect them from violence; and
- facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of that humanitarian relief, and ensure freedom of movement and safety for humanitarian workers.[5]

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Now more than ever

The demand for humanitarian action is likely to grow significantly as three global trends combine:

- rising number of people exposed to disasters;
- rising number of weather-related disasters; and
- failure to move most conflicts and fragile states into sustainable peace and development.

Vulnerability and disasters

Since 1980, reported weather-related disasters have increased by 233 per cent where records are available. This is the result of growing populations, more extreme weather, and improved reporting.[7]

Between the 1970s and 2000s, the drought-affected proportion of the earth doubled.[8] In many places, the seasonal distribution of rain has also changed. For example, rainfall has become more erratic in the vital months between March and June in the Horn of Africa.

Globally, flooding is an even greater threat. In 2010, more than 69 million people were exposed to floods,[10] and the numbers are projected to grow substantially in the coming decades.[11]

Such climatic effects are likely to have disproportionate consequences for women and children,[12] poor people and migrants. Millions of people are as likely to move *to* places of environmental vulnerability as *from* them, leaving them become trapped in vulnerable locations. In Dakar, Senegal, 40 per cent of migrants in the past decade have already moved *to* flood-prone areas.[13]

In 2011, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that, even without climate change, the risk from disasters will increase in many countries as more people are exposed to extreme weather conditions.[14] Future climate change is likely to lead to more frequent extreme weather events, with the resulting disasters affecting millions of people. Many of these people will live in mega-slums, where 1.4 billion are projected to live by 2020.[15]

Violence and fragile states

Few countries have made the transition from 'post-conflict' to peace since the end of the Cold War. In the past five years, only two of the top 20 recipients of humanitarian aid have moved out of the emergency stage.[17] There are 1.5 billion people currently living in areas affected by fragility, conflict or large-scale violence.[18]

Such areas are likely to become yet more vulnerable and violent as a result of competition over scarce energy, food, and water.[19] By 2010, 41 per cent of those living on or below the $1.25-a-day poverty line

were in fragile states. This is double the proportion in 2005, partly as a result of development success elsewhere. That share of the global total is set to continue to rise.[20]

Violence and resource competition may also increase migration,[22] and fuel a vicious cycle of additional competition, violence, and conflict. By the end of 2010, there were already 44 million people forcibly displaced around the world, the highest number for fifteen years.[23]

The insecurity faced by both displaced and settled communities creates substantial demands for humanitarian aid and protection, as violence affects women, children and men in different ways, and strikes the poorest and most marginalized groups the hardest.

Climatic disaster and conflict could be mitigated by practical steps to tackle climate change, poverty, and violence.[24] However, the humanitarian system must plan for the challenging future that current research and experience foresee.

Every year, Oxfam surveys communities in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In 2011, again, it heard girls' fear of sexual exploitation and violence, boys of forced labour and recruitment into armed militia.

Oxfam International (2011)[21]

2 Successes and failures

In 2011, Ahmad Faizal Perdaus, President of MERCY Malaysia, summed up 'the changing humanitarian landscape'. He said:

'Climate change adaptation, preparedness, and risk reduction mean old ways may no longer be relevant. Increasing disasters and technological advances pose opportunities and challenges. Conflicts are even more complicated.'[25]

In the face of this, he looked forward to 'a new business model for humanitarian action with a greater role for Southern as well as national and local NGOs.' As a major INGO based in Kuala Lumpur, MERCY represents this model.

Section 1 looked at some global trends that humanitarian action must respond to. This section discusses the key successes and failures of recent humanitarian action.

Progress in humanitarian aid

Recent progress in humanitarian aid include:

- increasing capacity of crisis-affected governments and regional organizations;

- increasing attention on the role of civil society, religious organizations and private companies, with a focus on further building their capacity;

- increasing focus on building resilience, for example, in emergency preparedness, disaster risk reduction (DRR), and adapting to climate change;

- increasing international funding, enabling humanitarian aid to reach tens of millions of people each year;

- diversifying international funding, including from Asian and Latin American governments and international companies; and

- reforming – slowly – UN and INGO humanitarian agencies.

Box 1 describes how new technology has also improved the reach of humanitarian aid.

Box 1: New technology

New technology improves early warning systems and spreads them around the world. Even in some of the poorest countries, affected people use cell phones and SMS messages to communicate and transfer cash by phone – though access to such technology varies from crisis to crisis, and by gender, with men dominating the tweets from recent crises.

Humanitarian agencies are using satellite imagery and constantly-improving innovations like crowd-sourcing, web-based maps using data from social media, and much else. In 2011, the Office for Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) used such crisis-mapping in Libya. In some cities, UNHCR keeps in touch with refugees by text. Humanitarians and information experts are only beginning to apply such technologies as useful tools, but the potential to do so appears great.

Sources: http://www.ushahidi.com/; http://libyacrisismap.net/; http://www.fmreview.org/technology/aleinikoff.html

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Failures in humanitarian aid

All these changes are positive but none have gone far enough. More than 300,000 people died in 2010 from natural disasters alone. Although not a typical year, this is a stark reminder of the progress still to be made.[27]

On one hand, there has been record international humanitarian funding and enormous achievements by individuals, communities and organizations. On the other, there is a continuing failure to manage humanitarian action consistently enough to reduce death and suffering to a minimum, and to learn from past crises so that action is never too little or too late.

Progress in assessment tools, funding mechanisms and other technical aspects has not been matched by changes to the fundamental problems of inconsistent leadership and media-driven interest, or by building genuine accountability to people in crisis-affected countries.[28]

All of the positive trends listed on the previous page are only steps in the right direction. Change and reform have not overcome:

- the gap between needs and the capacity to respond: too little investment has been made in the capacity of both civil society and governments of crisis-affected countries;

- the lack of will among some governments to respond, and, in the worst cases, governments and insurgents deliberately preventing people reaching the aid they need;

- the slow international response to some crises, particularly those without major media coverage;

- too slow progress in improving UN leadership and co-ordination; nor

- the limited investment in building resilience and DRR, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

Capacity building

Civil society, religious groups and private organizations

Families, friends and neighbours are the frontline of humanitarian action. Beyond them, millions provide relief through faith groups and civil society. National Red Cross and Red Crescent societies alone reached 45 million people in 2009.[30]

Oxfam's own humanitarian programmes increasingly work with local NGOs. Some Oxfam International affiliates, such as Oxfam Novib, have always focused their programmes in this way. Oxfam GB has more than doubled the proportion of its humanitarian spending with Southern partner organizations from nine per cent in 2003–4 to 19 per cent in 2010–11. In the Horn, East, and Central Africa, it rose from two per cent ten years ago to 14 per cent; in Southern Africa, from three per cent to 17 per cent; and in West Africa, from one per cent to 30 per cent.[31]

Even in difficult circumstances local civil society can deliver results. In Ga'an Libah in Somaliland, a local organization supported pastoralists whose livelihoods were collapsing in the face of drastic environmental degradation. With support from Oxfam, they helped the pastoralists construct stone terraces to minimize water runoff, and helped bring about the revival of grazing management and reforestation. The live-stock grew heavier and more numerous, and the pastoralists used the new income to send more children to school.[32]

In Central America, 110 civil society organizations support communities at risk of disasters across Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, and co-ordinate together as the *Concertación Regional de Gestión de Riesgos*.[33]

Even in Darfur, where local NGOs face an acute lack of funds and capacity, they have provided vital relief, and scaled-up to meet some of the gaps created after a number of INGOs were expelled in 2009. In late 2010 and early 2011, fierce fighting broke out around the town of Shangil Tobay. The Sudanese Dar el Salam Development Association (DDA) responded continuously. While many Sudanese NGOs are seen in Darfur as politically compromised, DDA is one of ten widely-accepted organizations that Oxfam funds as it seeks to support effective organizations trusted by the communities they serve.[35]

Even where civil society is strong, it can understandably struggle to scale-up in the face of large and rapidly-growing crises. Pakistani NGOs were a vital part of the country's response to the flooding in 2010, but that does not mean that every organization was equally capable.

When the crisis broke, Oxfam sought to support local organizations, but quickly found that some could not cope. Latrines were placed near water sources and Oxfam's Pakistan staff had to take over the management of some organizations' response to improve standards.[36]

While INGOs may find it easy to identify partners to cope with small, medium, or slowly-developing crises, finding those that can cope with sudden 'mega-disasters' is inevitably more challenging.

In any setting where armed conflict impedes humanitarian access, and where outside aid providers face political pressures, there are compelling reasons for international humanitarian groups to place their primary focus on strengthening local organizations.

El F. Osman, Oxfam America (2011)[34]

Crisis-affected governments and regional organizations

Since the 2004 tsunami, Indonesia has invested substantially in disaster response and preparedness, and in initiatives to reduce the impact of disasters. It recognized its responsibility to prepare for the continuing floods, volcanoes and earthquakes that never hit the international headlines. Its government invited local NGOs to help draft the National Disaster Management Law, which mainstreamed DRR in legislation and in district plans, and, in theory if not yet in practice, prioritized women's needs.

Indonesia is not alone in preparing for and responding to disasters and in building its resilience. In Bangladesh, the government provided 52 per cent of the response to 2009's cyclone Aila (with 37 per cent from INGOs and nine per cent from the UN).[39] Now, its Disaster Management Programme aims to institutionalize DRR in its Food and Disaster Management Ministry, as well as in 13 other ministries and agencies. It is consciously seeking to implement the international Hyogo Framework, which 168 governments agreed in 2005, to reduce the risk from environmental threats.[40]

Even in the poorest countries, progress has been made. The military government in Niger responded well to the floods that struck Niamey, the capital, in 2010, and co-ordinated a response involving a number of agencies. It knew what it could do itself, and what it could not, and asked for international assistance before it was too late. As Oxfam's Niger Director Mbacké Niang notes:

'They knew the state's roles and responsibilities, and worked hard to deliver on them.'[41]

Box 2 outlines the key roles a crisis-affected state should perform.

> ### Box 2: The crisis-affected state
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> The state's key roles include:
> - building resilience to shocks and stresses;
> - 'calling' a crisis at the right time;
> - providing assistance and protection from violence;
> - inviting international aid, when needed;
> - monitoring and co-ordinating international assistance;
> - setting legal and regulatory frameworks to govern assistance.

Source: Adapted from Paul Harvey (2009) 'Towards good humanitarian government: the role of the affected state in disaster response', ODI Humanitarian Policy Group Policy Brief 37, London: Overseas Development Institute.

But progress in building capacity is not universal. Encouraged by the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), many governments have set up National Platforms for DRR to co-ordinate implementation of the Hyogo Framework.[42] At present, however, some platforms work better than others; they are dependent on each government's will, in particular their willingness to include a wide spectrum of civil society. It takes energy, commitment, will, trust and resources to provide effective humanitarian action.

The Indian Government spent $6.2bn on emergencies in India between 2005 and 2010.

Development Initiatives (2011)[37]

In Mozambique donors have strongly supported the government's disaster response authority, the Instituto Nacional de Gestão de Calamidades (INGC), helping to fund 285 staff.

P. Harvey (2009)[38]

Some state action is not fair and impartial. In fact, some governments have limited their populations' access to assistance. For example, in 2009, Sudan revoked the licences of three national NGOs and expelled 13 international agencies that had collectively delivered more than half the aid in northern Sudan. According to the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), this deprived eastern Sudan of critical food and medical assistance, and encouraged a number of health-related crises in Darfur.[43]

Similarly, in the closing stages of Sri Lanka's 25-year civil war in 2009, the rebel Tamil Tigers refused to allow civilians to seek either safety or aid, while the Sri Lankan government placed numerous restrictions on humanitarian agencies' ability to reach them. According to the UN Secretary General, what the government allowed 'fell far short of the assistance required… [and] meant that otherwise treatable injuries have frequently resulted in deaths.'[44]

Even where the response is more effective, all the aid may not be targeted to those most in need. In 2009, Pakistan's lists failed to register displaced people if they came from areas deemed 'unaffected', and women often found it harder to register than men. In addition, the Pakistan Army's role in providing aid for those displaced by its counter-insurgency strategy provoked a number of concerns, including that alleged Taliban sympathisers were denied aid.[45] In many other countries too, including Colombia, Mexico and Brazil, the national armed forces play a central but not uncontroversial role in disaster response.

The Colombian government has a real desire to build its capacity, but neither the state nor its armed forces have been welcomed by many of its citizens affected by conflict or natural disasters. When Oxfam responded to severe floods in December 2010, it found widespread distrust of the local government in La Mojana, where more than 100,000 people were affected. This hindered its ability to work.[46]

There is great variety in how much progress has been made in regional organizations too. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has led the way in supporting its members and, at times, catalysing them into action. In 2008, it negotiated an effective response after cyclone Nargis struck Burma/Myanmar. Its Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response binds members to co-operate to reduce disaster losses and make joint emergency responses. In 2011, it set up its Co-ordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance and deployed teams to help the Thai government respond to extreme floods.[47] ASEAN has also developed strong links with national and international NGOs in its region, including through a consultation group currently chaired by Oxfam.

In 2011, the African Union agreed a humanitarian policy to 'institutionalize African hospitality' and expand its continent-wide Co-ordinating Committee on Humanitarian Affairs.

In the Middle East, the League of Arab States and the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) mediate in humanitarian crises. Since 2008, the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC) has had a humanitarian department,[48] and has been active in Pakistan, Libya and Somalia. In November 2011, the OIC agreed with the UN to work more closely on humanitarian issues.

Latin American governments have adopted a range of agreements leading up to the 2010 Brasilia Declaration on the Protection of Refugees. Several regional bodies have mandates to co-ordinate co-operation on DRR and disaster response, and to support national disaster management efforts. One of these bodies, *Centro de Coordinación para la Prevención de Desastres Naturales en América Central*, laid the groundwork for the Integrated Disaster Risk Management Policy that Central American presidents approved in 2010.

International aid

Too little, too late

In 2010, international humanitarian aid reached a record $16.7bn, but still did not meet all requirements. Swelled by the response to the crises in Pakistan and Haiti, UN appeals asked for 15 per cent more than in 2009, but donor governments gave only two per cent more.[50]

International responses are still too little or too late when crises fail to grip the world's media or political attention. Very few UN humanitarian appeals are well-funded, but 2011 saw a stark contrast in the 83 per cent funding for Libya and the 42 per cent for the second successive year of flooding in Pakistan.[51] Indeed, the lack of major media coverage in 2011 may help to explain why funds were lower and slower than those in response to Pakistan's floods in 2010. In 2010, more than $300m was given within three weeks of the appeal commencing. In 2011, it was only $58m.[52] This drop is beyond what can be explained by comparing the different scales of the disasters.

The 'CNN effect', which triggers enormous funds for some crises once the vast suffering has been televised, comes too late to galvanize timely responses to slow-onset disasters like droughts. See Box 3 for an example of this in Somalia in 2011: how, without timely media coverage, 'once again an early warning system failed to trigger a response until the situation was critical'.[53]

> **Box 3: Too late in Somalia[54]**
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> - August, 2010: Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) began warning of impending food crisis in the Horn of Africa.
> - November, 2010: Horn of Africa Food Security and Nutrition Group calls for 'pre-emptive action to protect livelihoods from confirmed La Nina'.
> - January, 2011: Oxfam 'wake-up call' gets minimal media coverage.
> - March, 2011: FEWSNET warns of 'famine' in parts of Somalia and predicts more people will need assistance between April and September; donor response still relatively small, though the Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission (ECHO) and US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) increased funds from late 2010.
> - June 29, 2011: Major media coverage begins triggering major international response.
> - July 20, 2011: UN declares 'famine' in parts of Somalia, triggering rapid and substantial increase in international funding.[55]

Sources of international aid

While Western donors struggled to maintain global aid, private individuals and companies donated $4.3bn in 2010.[57] Even under the current economic conditions, millions of people give generously to NGOs' crisis appeals. Some companies not only give funds, but in-kind donations, second staff, and build long-term relationships with NGOs and UN agencies, such as Price Waterhouse Cooper with MERCY Malaysia,[58] and TNT with the World Food Programme.[59]

The supply of humanitarian funds is also broadening among non-Western governments. In 2010, non-OECD governments gave $623m in international humanitarian aid, 20 times the amount in 2001.[60] In 2011, Arab donors' aid to Somalia put them on the world stage more than ever before.[61]

In 2011, the UN Emergency Relief Co-ordinator said that the days when the humanitarian system was dominated by Western countries was over.[62] One Oxfam worker in East Africa put it more starkly:

'The humanitarian system may be broken, but so is the West as we know it. Most OECD donors aren't the leading world powers of the future. Most INGOs are based in the old world, not the new. We must look to new areas to support future humanitarian action.'[63]

Working with local capacity?

Although funding is more diverse, international donors and agencies do not always work with the capacity available on the ground. Evaluating the response to Haiti's 2010 earthquake revealed a tendency for donors and others to overlook local government and civil society, as well as the views of affected people, similar to that revealed for years by previous crisis evaluations.[64]

The lack of local participation has been constantly identified as a failing. In 2011, two Oxfam workers wrote about Haiti,

'We don't observe improvements from one emergency to the next. Why is the humanitarian community able to improve in some areas but not this?'[66]

Local organizations often feel that INGOs show a lack of respect for their contribution and speed.[67] The rapid influx of funds can also lead to an 'aid economy' that excludes the most representative civil society organizations and encourages others.

Working with women

As the Humanitarian Response Index reported in January 2012, one of the most serious failings in humanitarian aid is the slow progress in assuring that gender is properly addressed. Only 60 per cent of OECD donors have gender policies, and few monitor them to see how they are put into practice on the ground.[68] Oxfam is determined to put gender at the heart of its humanitarian work; having recognised that it has to do more, Oxfam has made this one of the central goals of its humanitarian programming over the next few years.[69]

See Box 4 for an example of this problem and how it is being addressed in Indonesia.

Sources: Oxfam International (2011) 'Case Study – Indonesia: Jenggala Women: Living Close to Disaster', Oxford: Oxfam; Oxfam International (2011) 'Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction: a training pack', http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/gender-and-disaster-risk-reduction-a-training-pack-136105

Reaching the right people with the right aid

Special interests continue to pervert food aid in many countries. The USA is the world's biggest food aid donor, providing roughly half the world's food aid. But its programmes deliver more to the pockets of agribusiness and shipping companies than to the mouths of hungry people.

Oxfam International (2011)[70]

INGOs themselves have much to learn in the above areas and are not immune from the danger of considering their interests, as well as the needs of those affected by conflict and disaster. But there are far more powerful interests that bias humanitarian aid in different directions – towards favoured countries, groups, and types of relief, such as food aid which continues to be lobbied for by farm groups, shippers and others.

National governments do not necessarily serve their people and, in extreme cases, put obstacles in the way of relief. International donors have also skewed aid towards their own priorities. In some years, Iraqis have received twelve times as much, per capita, in humanitarian aid as the population of the DRC.[71] As the Humanitarian Response Index stated in 2010, the 'increasing politicization of humanitarian assistance means millions of people are not getting the aid they need.'[72] Though the 'war on terror' has become discredited, donors' newer focus on 'stabilization' raises the continuing concern that humanitarian aid may be driven not just by human needs, but by wider considerations. As one 2010 study put it:

'Despite areas of potential co-operation, the relationship between the humanitarian sector and international stabilization efforts tends to be marked by mistrust, suspicion, or hostility.'[73]

Examples of non-OECD donors focusing where they have particular interests include: China, which, in 2008, gave more than half its humanitarian aid to Burma/Myanmar;[74] and Arab and Muslim countries which, in 2011, gave generously to Somalia, Libya and Yemen. These reflect cultural and political affinities, but also raise questions of how, in a world of more diverse humanitarian funding, resources are likely to be targeted to the greatest humanitarian needs.

Bias in aid decisions, however, neither explains nor justifies the hostility to humanitarian aid in some parts of the world from governments as well as insurgents. All parties in Somalia, for example, have limited the

work of Western-based agencies. Box 5 details some of the challenges faced in Somalia.

Box 5: Challenges in Somalia

Operations by Western-based agencies have been limited due to insecurity, threats and donors' restrictions aimed at avoiding the risk of funds being diverted to terrorist groups. In response, INGOs and others have struggled to find ways to meet vast critical needs.

Many INGOs have invested in the capacity of Somali partners, but the dangerous environment has meant that monitoring and ensuring that aid reaches those in need is inevitably difficult. Oxfam and its partners have developed a seven point strategy to try to ensure that all aid is effectively monitored, but the challenge of doing so is ongoing.

At the same time, the OIC has co-ordinated Arabic/Islamic NGOs which, according to the OIC, reached 1.4 million people in Somalia in the six months from April 2011. This broad range of actors brought new strengths, reaching people that Western-based agencies could not. It also brought challenges, including in co-ordination and information-sharing.

Some members of the OIC Coalition for Relief attended the UN-led cluster meetings, but parallel co-ordination mechanisms by both the UN and OIC made it difficult to obtain a clear picture of all humanitarian action, particularly outside Mogadishu. In late 2011, OCHA and the OIC Coalition took steps to improve co-ordination, and there are hopes for more practical co-operation and a genuinely common humanitarian response.

Sources: Oxfam International (2011) 'Delivering aid in Somalia: the experience of Oxfam and its partner agencies', Oxford; Oxfam; UN OCHA (2011) 'Somalia Famine and Drought: Situation Report No.18', http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_2674.pdf

Unintended consequences

Like any other human activity, humanitarian aid can have unintended consequences. This concern was first prominently expressed in the 'Do No Harm' framework in the 1990s, after the enormous international effort to bring relief to Rwandan refugees.[75] The vast majority were suffering and innocent, but hidden among them were *genocidaires* responsible for approximately 800,000 deaths.

Since then, agencies have developed a wide range of tools, such as Action Aid's Participatory Conflict Analysis, to minimize the risk that their emergency work could ever increase conflict, or to weigh up the consequences of taking different actions. These include 'speaking out', major operational responses, and increasingly nuanced approaches that combine quiet advocacy with direct and indirect humanitarian actions. Since the mid-1990s, and most recently updated in 2009, Oxfam has had guidelines on those difficult choices.[76]

In 2011, the ODI summed up best practice from agencies' experience and set out six minimum standards to help them 'mitigate the potential harm of their emergency response'. Several of these related to building the capacity of local organizations, including the need to identify a 'spread of partners' among different ethnic or religious groups.[77]

UN leadership and co-ordination

In 1991, the UN established the Department for Humanitarian Affairs (which became OCHA) to:

'make more effective the collective efforts of the international community, in particular the UN system, in providing humanitarian assistance.'[78]

In the following years, the UN and INGOs faced an extraordinary series of crises: Rwanda and the 'complex emergencies' of the 1990s, Afghanistan and the 'war on terror', and a rising tide of climate-related disasters. Responses from the UN and INGOs saved millions of lives.

In 2005, after the slow response in Darfur, the UN launched a series of reforms to:

- improve co-ordination among humanitarian agencies through a 'cluster system' leading the response in each sector;
- improve leadership through a more consistent standard of UN Humanitarian Co-ordinators in each crisis;
- increase and speed up the funding through a central emergency fund and pooled funds; and
- improve partnership between the UN and other humanitarian actors.

It is now clear that these reforms have achieved relatively little, at least compared to the time invested by the UN and NGOs.

The UN-led 'clusters' often engage poorly with governments' efforts at co-ordination. Their focus on each sector, like shelter or health, does not encourage progress on issues common to all, such as DRR. Co-ordination between different clusters is usually poor. The Early Recovery cluster faces 'systematic challenges that hampers [its] ability to work effectively',[79] and so the value of clusters in bringing relief and development is limited.

The history of mistrust between the Western aid system and its counterpart in the Muslim world is long.
UN OCHA (2011)[80]

Other reforms have also made limited progress. Humanitarian Co-ordinators are often appointed without the skills and knowledge needed. Funding is often still slow. The UN also continues to struggle in crises where Western-based agencies are less acceptable than others. This includes Arab agencies with which the UN has not always had close relations.

In addition, the UN finds it difficult to strike a balance between being both a political and humanitarian intervener, particularly in 'contested environments' where insurgents see it as an enemy. UN 'integrated missions' political staff are often unfamiliar with basic humanitarian principles.

Resilience and DRR

Every country must be resilient to the shocks and stresses that come from natural events, climate change, and political and economic crises, like commodity price spikes or outbreaks of violence. Building that resilience partly depends upon investing in DRR and social protection, and mainstreaming climate adaptation through government action.

In Pakistan, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank estimate that an initial investment of just $27m would greatly reduce losses from future disasters. The cost of reconstruction after its 2010 floods is predicted to run to more than $10bn.

Oxfam International (2011)[81]

Some countries have invested in DRR for years, encouraged by the 1990s' Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, long before the Hyogo Framework was agreed in 2005. Likewise, donors, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and ECHO, have long-term programmes, like the Department for International Development's (DFID) Hunger Safety Nets Programme to mitigate the impact of droughts.

Globally, however, there is still little investment in DRR, and humanitarian and development programmes have just begun to use this approach. In 2009, only 0.5 per cent of total aid was devoted to DRR.[82] In 2011, the East Africa crisis was testament to this lack of priority. When donors did fund preparedness, it tended to be after rather than before the crisis.[83]

Similarly, some countries have developed policies and legislation to prepare for disaster, but not taken action. Uganda has local disaster management committees and a Ministry of Disaster Preparedness. A 2010 study found these active during emergencies but dormant between them.[84]

In many countries, it is the capacity of local government that is particularly neglected. In 2011, a survey in 69 countries found limited progress, with local authorities reporting little support from national governments in DRR.[85]

Even where there is great progress, it is challenging to replicate it. El Salvador has legislated for local disasters management committees. In the municipality of Acajutla, officials work with local NGOs and communities through an innovative programme called *Programa Reducción de Vulnerabilidades Ahuachapán-Sonsonate* (PRVAS). Supported by Oxfam, they respond quickly to emergencies, and cooperate successfully in disaster preparedness training and mitigation. However, it has been difficult to find the same commitment in other municipalities.[86]

'Think humanitarian'

The fundamental problem in many governments is that they do not believe that long-term vulnerability is a disaster waiting to happen, or that, when it happens, a crisis exists. This was the key failure in the Sahel's food crises in 2005 and 2010.

It was not just a problem of capacity and resources, but of governance and will. Too few governments count the losses that disasters can bring, especially for poor and marginalized people who may have little voice in their country's governance. Disaster risk hits marginal groups hardest, including women who may eat last and least in their families.

In the Sahel, many donor government officials, the UN and the Permanent Inter-State Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS) failed to see that food insecurity made people permanently vulnerable to crisis. A study of those crises concluded that '[t]he main challenge is that most governments remain sceptical of investing scarce resources in social protection.'[87]

In 2010, Mali, Chad and other governments in the Sahel were reluctant to raise awareness or take the necessary actions. Such failure to recognize when a normal drought is becoming a crisis runs far beyond West Africa. In 2011, the slow response to the East Africa crisis was partly because, in many governments and NGOs, too many people were resigned to what was happening. Since the Horn had seen drought in eight of the past ten years,[89] they hoped that 2011 would not be as bad as the warning signs suggested, and therefore did not take the action they could.

Until such governments accept that long-term vulnerability is normal but not inevitable, a crude relief-development dichotomy is wrong, and that humanitarian crises are not a national shame, it will be difficult to build resilience to cope with disasters.

Since the Horn famine of 1984, any 'dual-mandate' agency combining development and humanitarian missions have known that all their staff must 'think humanitarian'. They must be alert to warnings of crises, and ready to scale-up (and deprioritize other work) when they come.

The experience of East Africa in 2011 suggests that that 'humanitarian alertness' has still not been consistently learned and must become a higher priority across governments, the UN, and INGOs like Oxfam alike.

Box 6: Resilience to violence

Most humanitarian crises take place in conflict-affected countries, whether directly caused by violence or, like drought in Somalia, where the links are more complex.

Building peace and security, or resilience to violence, is vital. In part, it depends on the same search for equitable development and the same approaches, like social protection, as resilience to disasters. It also depends on the particular need to build fair and effective justice and security.

This paper does not cover Oxfam's support for peacebuilding and the protection of civilians, but please visit http://www.oxfam.org/en/campaigns/conflict for papers on particular conflicts and for its global report, *For a Safer Tomorrow.*

3   Challenges for the future

2011's lesson from Somalia was not only the importance of swift action and long-term resilience. The country's conflict made it impossible to reach hundreds of thousands of people in need. A better humanitarian system will not solve that. As Sadako Ogata, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees through the 1990s, said, humanitarian crises need more than humanitarian solutions.[90] They need peace, security and justice, development, and good governance.

They also need humanitarian action that *always* provides the assistance and protection people need, and wherever possible supports their long-term development. To ensure that action becomes the norm, Oxfam and others face at least five major challenges, to:

- build the capacity of states and civil society while making difficult judgements on how to work with states with varying capacities and commitments to humanitarian principles, and finding vastly different civil society capacity;

- build communities' resilience to cope with disasters, climate change, violence, and economic and political shocks, while keeping the operational capacity to respond when needed;

- encourage states and others to uphold humanitarian principles while learning from non-Western agencies how to implement them in different contexts. This also demands making difficult judgements on the consequences of different courses of action;

- encourage new and different sources of funding and action from emerging economies, private companies, and others, while encouraging them to uphold humanitarian principles, and respond to needs wherever they are; and

- strengthen the quality and accountability of INGOs, including through some form of certification of effective humanitarian action, while recognizing the value of diverse and varied humanitarian agencies.

Building capacity in diverse and challenging contexts

We can find a sustainable solution to the floods if we design and implement our own risk reduction activities.

Community activist in Maichanir char, Bangladesh (2011)[91]

International aid supplements what effective states and active citizens can achieve. That will continue to be the case. But economic disorder in many donor countries will limit the amount available for international aid. In addition, the UN's divided agencies, only loosely co-ordinated by the Emergency Relief Co-ordinator, place an inevitable limit on the UN's prospect of further improvement. There will be increasingly stark gaps between rising humanitarian needs and response, unless greater capacity is found in the governments and civil society of affected countries, and among the diverse range of other humanitarian actors.

Capacity building should be at the heart of humanitarian action, as it has been at the heart of development for years. The UN, donors and INGOs should all focus on results defined not only as saving lives and reducing suffering immediately, but also as reducing vulnerability to future crises.

In 2012, the development of the UN's Consolidated and Flash Appeals, issued for each major crisis, offers one way to increase that capacity building. To date, the appeals have presented donors with lists of projects, rather than strategic plans. Now, however, the UN recognizes that they must present clear strategies within 48 hours of a new crisis. This provides an ideal opportunity to show how international assistance can supplement the affected government's response, how aid can build national capacity, and, through monitoring these appeals, how well international aid is doing that.

Judging how to work in crisis-affected states

INGOs should look to a state's capacity and will to respond, and do so in line with humanitarian principles and standards, before determining their role. Frequently, this will require careful and difficult judgements. Working in effective states with significant capacity and a determination to help all their people is one thing. Working in fragile states or those that are seen as illegitimate or corrupt will always be fraught with difficulty.

All of this varies by case. In general terms, however, the different models of states and international responses can be summarized by Table 1, which Oxfam developed in 2011 to help guide its humanitarian programming.

Too often, aid agencies have neglected the central role of the state. Neutrality and independence have been taken as shorthand for disengagement, rather than principled engagement.

P. Harvey (2009)[92]

Table 1: Matching international response to national state capacity		
	State willingness	
State capacity	**Willing and able state** • Operational support in major crises only • National advocacy for improved state performance, primarily by supporting national civil society	**Able but unwilling state** • Seeking to support parts of the state that may be more willing • Support for civil society actors depending on their independence • Operational in large crises • National/international advocacy for state to assume responsibilities
	Willing but unable state • State capacity building and support for other local actors • Operational where there is insufficient local capacity • Advocacy for international support	**Unwilling and unable state** • More work with civil society organizations, non-traditional agencies and, where accepted, the UN • Advocacy for international support • Where possible, operational in small and medium crises, as well as large

Not least, this table points to the need for advocacy, and support for civil society's advocacy to hold the state to account, as a vital part of INGOs' humanitarian work. In Central America, Oxfam's investment in local NGOs includes a toolkit for their humanitarian advocacy. Sometimes such advocacy will not be easy. Confident states welcome

civil society advocacy, while nervous ones forbid it. But, directly or indirectly, INGOs should increasingly consider how influencing the state is central to their humanitarian effort.

Building civil society capacity

There must be a determination to build capacity *with*, rather than forcing it *upon*, local actors. This will involve identifying partners with the potential and willingness to carry out different roles, from DRR and advocacy to scaling-up in response to rapidly-growing disasters. As one Oxfam worker said in 2011:

'For some INGOs, this will require a cultural shift, to genuinely listen to organizations that don't speak INGOs' jargon, and understand their pressures, including those that come from the accounting that is at the heart of the upward accountability to donors.'[93]

The challenge for INGOs is often judging how fast, as they build the capacity of others, they should transform themselves to a less direct role. If they transform too slowly, it could undermine the developing capacity. If too quickly, it could leave unmet human needs while that capacity takes years to build up. This is not because INGOs have superior knowledge; on the contrary, international aid is ineffective when it ignores local organizations' knowledge of the context. But in many countries, local organizations simply struggle to have the capacity and resources they need.

The process of capacity building should begin long before a crisis strikes. Only long-term support will enable local organizations to respond more and more effectively from one emergency to the next. An increasing focus on building capacity does not mean that, when the next crisis comes, every local NGO will be able to cope. This lesson was clear to Oxfam in the Philippines in 2009, when it had not identified organizations with sufficient emergency capacity before typhoon Ketsana struck, and some of its response was too slow as a result.[95]

After Ketsana, the Philippines also passed its National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act to improve co-ordination between government and civil society organizations around DRR, and since then has agreed the further steps still needed, including building local government capacity. As a result, Oxfam has continued to shift its focus from direct disaster response to capacity building, supporting national NGOs to develop their Humanitarian Response Consortium. It acts as a 'humanitarian broker', helping those NGOs obtain funding to continue their growth, while remaining ready to respond to disasters beyond the capacity of local partners to cope with alone.

In December, 2011, the tropical storm Sendong, which killed more than 1,000 people in the conflict-affected island of Mindanao, showed how much progress still has to be made. The Philippines government declared a state of calamity, sought international assistance and allocated one billion pesos to relocate affected communities. But the local government of Cagayan de Oro was totally unprepared for the disaster which local economic activities had contributed to. Rampant logging, the conversion of land to pineapple and banana plantations, and small-scale mining all increased the silting of the main rivers, which led to massive flooding. Local church groups, NGOs and others ac-

Even in the midst of emergency, it is possible to build the capacity of local partners, but often there is little time to focus on it successfully.

S. Douik, Islamic Relief (2011)[94]

We see a vital role in harnessing local capacity, advocating compliance with humanitarian standards, and helping to institutionalize response and DRR in national and local government plans.

P. del Rosario, Humanitarian Co-ordinator, Oxfam GB, Philippines

tively co-ordinated an emergency response, and criticised the local government for its unwillingness to work with them. Oxfam supported the Humanitarian Response Consortium's response, providing relief to more than 50 per cent of the population in evacuation centres, and is (at the time of writing) helping the Consortium lobby and campaign for a better local government response.[96]

Building resilience

Much more can be done through aid to reduce communities' vulnerabilities to disaster and to help them endure future crises.[97] DRR should be brought into humanitarian, development and rehabilitation programme design from the start, and enacted in legislation in all countries.

Such DRR is part of a whole approach to both development and humanitarian aid that helps people build their resilience to the shocks that they face. It works through social protection and agriculture, and by protecting poor people's rights to services and land.[98]

Principles and Consequences

Humanitarian aid must save lives, reduce suffering and preserve human dignity. To do that, it must be impartial and independent.[100]

To humanitarian agencies, these principles are an article of faith; to many outside, they often seem vague. Yet aid without principles risks being aid without quality. It might do some good, but unless driven by impartial assessments and decisions, aid is unlikely to meet the greatest needs, and is likely to increase tensions between different groups.

Much more could be done to encourage states and others to uphold humanitarian principles than proclaiming them as a self-evident truth. Western donors could consistently give aid on the basis of need, as promised in their Good Humanitarian Donor (GHD) principles.[103] The Red Cross and Red Crescent movement could redouble their efforts to raise governments' awareness of the principles, as it exists in almost every country and adheres to common principles (including the Code of Conduct on Disaster Relief).

But every humanitarian actor must also listen and learn what the principles mean in different cultures and make difficult judgements on the consequences of different actions. Being impartial and independent is the vital beginning, but not the end, of ethical humanitarian choices.

The first challenge is to listen more to non-Western voices about what humanitarian principles mean in practice. The Humanitarian Forum[104] and other organizations already bring together agencies from different cultures, and demonstrate that their principles are indeed universal - rooted in all world faiths. But Western-based agencies and donors must still do more to learn from others, including the Islamic organizations accepted in parts of the world where they are not. There must be a dialogue about what it means for every actor to encourage principled programmes and to uphold international humanitarian law in dangerous and difficult contexts.

Humanity means addressing human suffering wherever it is found, with particular attention to the most vulnerable.
UN General Assembly (1991)[99]

Impartial aid means equal treatment for every person in distress, according to their needs, without any discrimination because of their race, gender, or anything else.
Adapted from ICRC (2009)[101]

Independent *aid is directed without influence from any national or international political body or interest group.*
Adapted from ICRC (2009)[102]

The second challenge is to judge the consequences of different approaches, and of the compromises that may sometimes be needed to get aid to those who need it – and of what compromises may be too far. This demands knowledge of contexts and cultures as well as humanitarian principles. Agencies must think beyond what Peter Walker, Director of the Feinstein Center, in 2011 called:

'the fundamentalist rant of "our principles at any price", towards a more nuanced, pragmatic approach which keeps its eye firmly on the goal of alleviating suffering, but understands the need to compromise.' [105]

The dilemmas that humanitarian workers confront in crises like Somalia cannot be ignored. That does *not* mean that impartiality should be compromised. But it does mean accepting that peace, development and environmental sustainability are as noble ambitions as humanitarianism. Humanitarians have sometimes forgotten that truth. All those aims must be pursued, without compromising the humanitarian imperative to save lives, but with the humility to accept that there are difficult choices between different strategies.

In Somalia, for example, 'taxes' to armed groups may not constitute ethical pragmatism to get aid through. Rather, they may fuel the violence that largely created the crisis in the first place. In the long term, they may cause more suffering than the aid agencies' relief can reduce. In that case, they are far from humanitarian or principled.

It may be obvious to multi-mandate agencies that humanitarian aid is not the only means to reduce human suffering and increase human dignity. But solely humanitarian agencies must understand that too. Humanitarian agencies must respect local capacities and admit that *they* have not always been consistent in upholding principles, explaining their motives, or setting out in each crisis what 'principled' action really is.

In reality, humanitarian principles will only be accepted as universal when humanitarian action focuses more on working with the local and national institutions of affected countries. It must ensure that, wherever possible, aid builds sustainable solutions which local people can use after the crisis has passed.

Without this, the call for upholding principles is likely to sound like a Western lament. With it, humanitarian principles could at last become truly universal, compatible with the core development principles of effective aid being owned by the affected communities, and aligned with their priorities.[108]

Diversifying international support

This paper is not propounding a 'Southern solution' alone. The scale of humanitarian need is too great for that. For the foreseeable future, many fragile and conflict-affected states will not have the capacity or governance to cope, and building capacity elsewhere will be gradual.

Humanitarian action must be able to call on a larger, more diverse pool of international resources, including non-Western donors and the private sector, to supplement OECD donors and others.

MSF's freedom of action is not rooted in a moral 'space' that simply needs to be proclaimed. It is the product of transactions with political and military forces … [But] acknowledging that humanitarian aid is only possible when it coincides with the interests of the 'powers that be' does not have to mean giving way to political forces.

M. Allié, President, Medicins Sans Frontiers (2011)[106]

Too often, aid agencies have neglected the central role of the state. Neutrality and independence have been taken as shorthand for disengagement, rather than principled engagement.

ODI 2009[107]

The central challenge is similar for countries and companies alike. It is to ensure they pursue quality and appropriateness through principles. They should focus on programmes like DRR and crises out of the media spotlight, as well as 'mega-disasters'.

This means encouraging corporate philanthropists to give impartially to the highest priorities, not necessarily those with the most publicity. For the for-profit private sector involved in providing relief, this means *contracting* them to deliver to international standards and principles.

For emerging donor governments, it means implementing GHD principles more consistently than some of their Western peers. They should not follow the worst of Western practice, like prioritizing crises where their armies are fighting. Rather, they should follow the best of global practice to deliver effective, co-ordinated aid.

Emerging donor governments should also have a greater voice in international humanitarian discussions. UN agencies and others have expanded their outreach to emerging country donors, but most international humanitarian forums are still Western-dominated.

The GHD initiative has only three non-Western signatories: South Korea, Japan, and Brazil. However, it also prioritizes outreach to the UAE and Singapore.[110] Every international humanitarian forum must become more inclusive of non-Western donors and affected governments. The time to build global humanitarian governance is now.

Countries that do not belong to the established donor club have little opportunity to influence the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise.

A. Donini (2009)[109]

Strengthening quality and accountability

This paper is a challenge to Oxfam and INGOs, as much as anyone, to focus an increasing proportion of our humanitarian effort on building the capacities of others.

This means working with them before disaster strikes, adding value to their work, learning from their experiences and building an increasingly locally-led response. It also means that INGOs and donors must accept that their media profile may go down as they maximize their impact by supporting others.

But that is not all that INGOs should do. They must continue the progress in quality that has been made since the seminal evaluation of humanitarian aid around Rwanda in 1994.[111]

Much has been done. Humanitarian agencies have developed standards to improve performance, including the Sphere Humanitarian Charter,[112] Humanitarian Accountability Partnership[113] and People in Aid.[114] In 2012, these initiatives may move towards a single direction.

More needs to be done. Self-regulation is no longer enough. Affected people have a right to know that agencies reach certain standards through some scheme to certify the agencies that do.

There should also be a firmer ambition to support local organizations and involve affected communities than the 'let's try' tone of some existing initiatives.[115] And humanitarian programmes should be better designed to listen to the different needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls, and men and boys.

Women are just as responsible for putting food on the table, taking disaster preparedness measures, keeping survival kits ready, adopting water and sanitation practices and passing them on to our children. We are just as capable. That's what I said to the men.

F. Begum, Bethuri char, Bangladesh (2011)[116]

Humanitarian agencies should actively promote women's participation and verify that their responses are adapted to what women say.[117] It is listening and being accountable to affected people also that drive the increasing focus on helping people find safety as well as assistance, wherever violence – as well as the shortage of food or water or other traditional humanitarian services – threatens them. In many crises, Oxfam responds to these growing priorities of gender and protection in the same programme.

> ### Box 7: Forum de Femmes, helping protect women and girls in DRC
>
> Across eastern DRC, Oxfam supports 56 local committees of six men and six women to challenge the authorities to prevent abuses, and obtain medical, legal and psycho-social services.
>
> In each area, a *Forum des Femmes* has been created, which women report has resulted in greater access to the authorities and higher social status.
>
> But the committees also allow men to support women, by addressing the different threats facing men and women, including sexual violence against men and boys, and avoiding the stereotype of female victims and male perpetrators that many Congolese resent.

4   Conclusion

The humanitarian project is not just a European tradition. It is rooted in the universal behaviour to help other human beings in distress. It has been encapsulated in all faiths, from *Dana*, one of Hinduism's and Buddhism's vital practices, to Islam's *Zakat*, and Christian charity. It is no coincidence that local religious organizations are at the forefront of providing relief.

In the twentieth century, humanitarianism was seen as a Western-based action. In fact, the vast majority of relief was already given by millions of families and communities around the world, in addition to local NGOs and authorities.

The humanitarian project is needed now more than ever. But in the twenty-first century, in a world no longer dominated by the West, humanitarianism must rediscover its local and global roots.

The future of humanitarian action lies increasingly in the global South: in the governments, civil societies, religious and private organizations, and others of crisis-affected regions.

International humanitarian agencies will be as vital as ever. But their greatest responsibility will be to help build and learn from that Southern capacity. They should complement this capacity in their own operations, so that the government and civil society of affected states can at last take their rightful place at the forefront of global humanitarian action.

Recommendations

Every humanitarian aid actor should:

- make timely and appropriate responses to warnings of emerging disasters;

- assess needs and deliver aid impartially and independently;

- strive to be sensitive to the specific vulnerabilities of gender, age and disability;

- promote the participation of women and children and all vulnerable groups in humanitarian aid;

- ensure aid is more accountable to those who have been affected;

- put a greater focus on building local capacity and on disaster risk reduction; and

- when faced with difficult dilemmas make transparent decisions based on the best possible judgement on the consequences of different courses of action.

Crisis-affected governments should:

- do all they can to generate the will and resources to reinforce national and local capacities to provide principled responses in emergencies. This should involve specific legislation and early warning triggers, generating an immediate contingency-planned response;

- implement programmes for social protection that meet the needs of the most vulnerable and poorest people; and

- ensure equal access to all essential services, including health, education, justice and security, to help build resilience to violence.

OECD and emerging donor governments should:

- focus a greater proportion of their development spending on building affected governments' capacity to achieve the above goals;

- monitor investments in that capacity as a key indicator of their aid, and learn from those governments' experience;

- double the proportion of total aid focused on DRR; and

- strive for more effective aid to increase resilience to violence in the most fragile states.

INGOs should:

- put a greater focus on building national and local civil societies' capacities, and on DRR, as part of good humanitarian and development practice. Over time, this will mean lower operational responses, but only when and where local capacity is able to cope;

- advocate and respond immediately to warnings of disasters;

- strive to combine working with state bodies with advocacy and support for civil society to help hold the state to account;

- strengthen their humanitarian identity to distinguish themselves from other actors;

- develop some form of certification to show that agencies meet a standard of effective, impartial and timely humanitarian action, including genuine partnership with local organizations. This can serve as the distinctive factor between them and other actors; and

- seek to diversify international support, and ensure that aid reaches the right people.

The UN should:

- ensure a strong Humanitarian Co-ordinator in every crisis;

- redouble its effort to improve its humanitarian leadership, wherever possible in partnership with the affected state;

- hold in-country cluster leads to account for performance;

- maintain a 'firewall' between the management of political and military peacekeeping and the UN's humanitarian functions, even in UN integrated missions; and

- improve relations with non Western-based agencies.

Regional organizations should:

- develop their leadership, including in setting principled standards, and improving their capacity to support national governments; and

- where necessary, catalyse those governments into action.

Parties in armed conflicts should:

• allow civilians access to whatever humanitarian aid they need, and protect them from violence; and

• facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of that humanitarian relief, and ensure freedom of movement and safety for humanitarian workers.

For more detailed analysis and recommendations about the role of the private sector, military forces, and others in humanitarian action, please see the Oxfam International Humanitarian Policy Notes at: http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/humanitarian-policy-notes.

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For more information, please contact Fred Wessels, Programme Information Manager, Oxfam GB at fwessels@oxfam.org.uk (as of January 2012)

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