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International Humanitarian Assistance: What Must Change

By Catherine Bragg

SYNOPSIS

For decades, international humanitarian assistance has been a supply-driven enterprise of rich countries funding multilateral and international organisations to distribute aid in poor and fragile states. To be more demand-driven, we should develop modalities that enable crisis-affected people to access the help they need.

COMMENTARY

LAST DECEMBER, at a Mass in Dublin, congregants were asked to pray for the victims of the Anak Krakatau tsunami in Indonesia and for countries to be generous in coming to their aid. As someone who has observed the humanitarian scene for two decades, I knew the second part would not be necessary.

The disaster was of a scale well within Indonesia's ability to cope. Besides, even when confronted with a greatly more devastating earthquake in Sulawesi a few months earlier, Indonesia accepted only very limited and targeted assistance. What then is the place of international humanitarian assistance in today's world?

International Humanitarian Assistance Today

Increasingly, middle income countries have developed national structures and capacity to lead and address (primarily natural) disasters response. In 2016, against a backdrop of an estimated 100 million significantly food-insecure people, amongst whom are also part of the estimated 65 million involuntarily displaced persons, nations committed to increasing "localisation" of humanitarian action at the World Humanitarian Summit.

"Localisation" has come to denote aid as provided by those closest to the people in

need. Multilateral and international humanitarian organisations have translated it to mean engaging more local partners. Donors take it to mean shortening the funding pathway to the front line. Governments, especially in Asia and for natural disasters, prefer a model of "national lead-regional organisations back-up international support".

A recent major report by Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP), *The State of the Humanitarian System (2018 ed.)* indicates that there have been only slight movements towards "localisation" amongst donors and agencies. They seem to be still caught in a post-Cold War model of rich countries funding multilateral and international humanitarian organisations to work in poor and fragile states.

As reported, in many conflict situations, governments have become good at thwarting international assistance. Alongside the multilateral and international agencies, there is now a plethora of "non-traditional" actors in the humanitarian sphere – private sector entities, faith-based charities, etc. The report's lead author laments that the current international humanitarian system is less than the sum of its parts.

Aid Should Be Demand-Driven

In an era of rising antipathy towards multilateralism, international law and international cooperation, an understandable tendency is to pivot to a "small-is-better" and "national-trumps-international" mindset. I think focusing on changing the aid providers is looking in the wrong place.

Studies after studies show that crisis-affected people are not helpless victims, but people with their own agency. If they need help, they turn first and foremost to family, friends and neighbours, long before outside intervention kicks in. As someone said succinctly, today's disaster "victims" do not sit around waiting for aid agencies to come with bags of rice. They take out their cell phones and text their cousins in Miami, Amsterdam or Dubai and say, "send money".

International humanitarian assistance cannot continue to be an enterprise of aid suppliers. Aid must be demand driven. In the 21st Century, we need to turn "assistance" from aid provision to the enabling of those affected by disasters to access the help they need.

Enabled Access as Aid

Even as there still is a place for provisions to be made available when they are scarce, international agencies should not start with that as a first premise. They need to acknowledge the presence and capabilities of the myriad of parties present, whether governmental or non-governmental, personal or commercial, and work to maximise the chances of those in need getting help.

There have been two recent positive developments beneficial to enabling – agencies' use of cash transfer programmes and investments in information/communications/technology (ICT). Their full potential, though, has been limited by agencies viewing them as efficiency-improvement measures and not as people-enabling ones.

For example, cash is still seen as substitution for agency-mandated commodities distribution (e.g. World Food Programme for food distribution) with little willingness to combine forces for cross-sectoral cash transfers. Agencies develop ICT to facilitate their own work and their communication with recipients, without encouraging them to use the telecommunications means to reach the full range of humanitarian actors and programmes in theatre.

Future of Aid in Integrating Access

An observation from a recent earthquake response is where there is in-country strong disaster management capacity, the added-value of international intervention is not more capacity for emergency response or addressing basic human needs. Disaster response might benefit from more qualitative, principled intervention, in collaboration with local actors, in the areas such as gender, community inclusion or protection.

The international community may see these as values-driven programming, but in fact, they are enabling programming to ensure needs are met with more equitable access especially for the most vulnerable.

End-users are best served when they have integrated access. Just look at the integration of movies, television and videos. The current vibrant entertainment scene did not come about because Hollywood decided to make better movies. It came about because of technology-driven integrated access and viewers demand.

The future of international humanitarian assistance is in continuing to search for more and better ways to integrated access for crisis-affected people.

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