# NOW OR NEVER

## MAKING HUMANITARIAN AID MORE EFFECTIVE

cooperación española

DARA

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*To mark its 25th anniversary, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), in collaboration with DARA, hosted three dialogues on humanitarian aid effectiveness in October and November 2013. Speakers included* ***Valerie Amos****, UN Under-Secretary General and Emergency Relief Coordinator;* ***Peter Maurer****, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross; and* ***Claus Sørensen****, Director General of Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department, ECHO. Representatives of the Spanish humanitarian community, including UN agencies and NGOs, attended the events.*

*The sessions were held under The Chatham House Rule. This report covers the main points discussed*

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Page 3: Congolese refugees, UNHCR / D.Alachi
Page 5: Tacloban, Philippines after typhoon Haiyan, IRIN / Jason Gutierrez
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# KEY MESSAGES

## THE NEED FOR GREATER EFFECTIVENESS

In many humanitarian crises, the needs of affected populations far outweigh available resources and capacity to respond. Maximising aid efforts is one of the most important challenges for the humanitarian sector.

## THE ELEMENTS OF AID EFFECTIVENESS

Presence, coverage, respect for humanitarian principles, adherence to International Humanitarian Law (IHL), even and flexible funding, meaningful coordination, and pushing for development actors to take up their roles.

## CAPACITY IN ARMED CONFLICT

Progress in the capacity to deliver assistance in response to natural disasters has not been matched in conflict situations, where the effectiveness of the humanitarian sector is being increasingly questioned.

## HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES

Humanitarian response cannot be effective if it is not principles-based. Securing principled action is a responsibility of all humanitarian actors.

## INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW (IHL)

IHL provides rules to regulate humanitarian action in situations of armed conflict. It provides a highly relevant framework for negotiating humanitarian access with all parties to a conflict.

## FUNDING

The current system for defining need and consolidating appeals is considered dysfunctional, if not perverse, since there exists a habit of “piling up numbers” to rally political support.

## DIVERSITY

The World Humanitarian Summit will need to contribute to defining a space that gives room to the many ways of delivering humanitarian assistance.

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## MAKING HUMANITARIAN AID MORE EFFECTIVE

**Greater effectiveness in humanitarian aid has never been more important.** In many humanitarian crises, such as Syria and the Sahel, the needs of affected populations far outweigh available resources and capacity to respond. More damaging and frequent disasters are expected to have a greater toll on a higher number of people. In contexts of armed conflict, the capacity of humanitarian organisations to deliver humanitarian aid is increasingly under scrutiny. And the appearance of new actors on the crisis-response scene is making us consider different ways of providing assistance. The stakes are high and it is not surprising that maximising the impact of aid efforts in highly complicated and fast-evolving operating environments is one of the most important challenges for the humanitarian sector.

In the Humanitarian HardTalk series, speakers and participants touched on a number of elements that, if put together, would constitute effectiveness. These include presence and coverage; respect for humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law; even and flexible funding; building better links with development; and better coordination amongst all players.

## THE WORLD HUMANITARIAN SUMMIT

Humanitarian effectiveness has been selected as one of the main themes of the World Humanitarian Summit announced by the UN Secretary-General for 2016. Many expectations exist for this global gathering as the humanitarian community has grown exponentially over the last decade. Many feel it is time to bring this community together around the table in order to demonstrate that it is inclusive and actors that are relatively new to humanitarian action can find their place. A divided humanitarian system in which each would go its own direction would not be productive and the right way to go, according to one of the dialogue speakers.

The timing of the Summit is important, as it comes at a time when there are a range of high-level international conferences covering different but related fields.

NECESSARY ELEMENTS FOR HUMANITARIAN AID TO BE EFFECTIVE: PRESENCE, COVERAGE, RESPECT FOR PRINCIPLES AND IHL, FLEXIBLE FUNDING, BUILDING BETTER LINKS WITH DEVELOPMENT, AND COORDINATION

## THE CAPACITY TO DELIVER

“Never before have so many people been assisted nor has the humanitarian sector been so important.” This point, made by one of the participants in the Humanitarian HardTalk series, provides much hope for the future in terms of the sector becoming more effective and reaching people in need. The exponential growth of humanitarian organisations in the last 15 years is generally seen as good news. There is more capacity and professionalism; more information and data on the essential needs of people; the system seems better coordinated; and financial resources have grown as well.

With the increased capacity of the sector, the question to be raised is whether the humanitarian community is able to reach those most in need everywhere. Disasters such as the Haiti earthquake, or more recently, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, demonstrate that many organisations are ready to deploy in the case of a natural disaster. Public campaigns to raise financial resources of such disasters are launched more rapidly as the media finds it easier to tell the story about the difference that humanitarian agencies can make in the lives of those affected by the disaster.

## DETERMINING WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY OF WORKING AND COMPLYING WITH HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES IS NOT ALWAYS POSSIBLE

**The general progress in the capacity to respond to natural disasters stands in sharp contrast with humanitarian responses in armed conflicts.** Some humanitarian organisations that work regularly in these situations have noted that they are too few in numbers on the ground, especially outside of conflict capitals. The war in Central African Republic is a pertinent example of such a situation, but also in other situations, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there has been a concentration of organisations in the regional capital Goma, with too few organisations present at the frontlines. For humanitarian organisations to be more effective, they will have to step up their efforts to work in armed conflicts.

**Unimpeded humanitarian access and acceptable security conditions are prerequisites for the effective delivery of assistance and protection.** It is a worrying development that more and more governments invoke their sovereignty to keep international humanitarian organisations from their doorsteps. Insecurity and administrative red tape have also been mentioned as reasons why access is not forthcoming. Syria is a case in point. While the UN chemical arms missions saw a breakthrough in visiting suspected sites, humanitarian agencies have not seen the same level of cooperation from the Syrian regime in spite of enormous diplomatic efforts. As it was noted in one of the debates, “our ability to operate on the ground becomes more complicated.”

In one of the HardTalk sessions a participant rhetorically wondered “When states block access, what do you do? You know that there are people in need. What is the measure of effectiveness?” Humanitarian organisations will take different decisions in negotiating access, depending on the compromises they find acceptable. As in the case of Syria, some will choose to work cross-border, as this is the only available way for them to provide aid to those most in need. For others this mode of action is a deal breaker as it does not fit with their way of working or mandates since they are expected to work through the central government. Either way of working, cross-border or through the central government, has its pros and cons and there is not just one completely effective formula. Humanitarian organisations have to make difficult decisions on a daily basis. Determining what is the most effective way of working and complying with humanitarian principles is not always possible.

The lack of access is not the only reason why some are concerned about the growing distance between humanitarian organisations and those whom they seek to assist. A number of organisations, especially UN agencies and some large international NGOs, increasingly ‘outsource’ their work to local contractors and organisations, especially in insecure environments. While perhaps the only way to provide humanitarian response in some situations, this trend has also a downside as it reduces the direct contact between those who provide and those who seek assistance.

The theme of proximity was also raised in the context of accountability to affected populations. Only through active engagement with the affected populations will humanitarian organisations be able to understand the real needs of people. Although much progress has been made, it

was noted that differences exist in terms of how humanitarian agencies understand and implement the concept of accountability to affected populations.

## HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

A common feature of the three HardTalk sessions was the emphasis placed on humanitarian principles, the cornerstone of aid effectiveness. **Humanitarian response cannot be effective if it is not principles-based.** Following the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence everywhere is a condition for being able to be present in different situations. As one participant noted, "we could not be present in the northern part of Mail had we not been completely neutral and seen as not being linked to the government."

Restrictions on access may imply that humanitarian response can only be delivered to a part of the population, risking being perceived as partial. The principle of impartiality determines that those who are most in need receive aid first. "In those situations, the worst thing you can do is to pretend that you are following humanitarian principles, while it is clear that this is impossible," one speaker noted.

On top of this, the intention to adhere to the principles of humanitarian response is not necessarily accepted by all parties to a conflict. While humanitarian principles remain absolutely critical, there are armed actors that do not demonstrate any respect for those principles. As one participant noted: "their sole agenda is to destabilise or create havoc and they thrive in situations of lawlessness, chaos, and impunity."
But principled humanitarian action is sometimes also challenged from other, perhaps unexpected, sides. The involvement from (Western) political leaders and (donor) government representatives can become problematic when foreign policy concerns dominate humanitarian decision-making. There are plenty of examples of increased donor spending on crises when a given country features high on the political agenda. One participant noted that he had to argue with one government that was using the humanitarian needs in Syria as an argument for regime change. At the same time, it was also mentioned that humanitarians need the political side to put pressure on the parties to a conflict, such as in Syria, to allow humanitarian access. "Humanitarians cannot do the work they are supposed to do anymore because there is insufficient political support for humanitarian action. The parties in Syria are not pressured enough to offer humanitarian space. So we are in an uncomfortable intertwining of humanitarian and political agendas," it was said.

Securing independent and principled humanitarian action is a pending challenge for many who coordinate and decide on funding and operational priorities.
UN integrated missions in which many different activities, including humanitarian action, development aid, peace-building, human rights activities, and rule of law are packaged together in one structure are perfectly understandable as the UN is the multi-mandate organisation *par excellence*. The precondition for this system to work, however, is minimal political consensus. "If this is non-existent and the UN is struggling with access issues in a highly polarised political environment in which armed conflict dominates, then an integrated approach is damaging, not only to the UN, but also undermines the work of others that are trying to deliver according to the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. There should be a better understanding among all involved on the advantages and limitations of an integrated mission. The mixing of concepts and blurring of boundaries is what causes so much damage in the humanitarian community at the moment," one speaker said. When the UN is engaged in peace-keeping and

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IHL WAS CONSIDERED A HIGHLY RELEVANT FRAMEWORK TO HELP PROMOTE PRINCIPLED HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN ARMED CONFLICTS

peace-building missions, their legitimacy to coordinate humanitarian response may be compromised "as they are bringing humanitarian response within the all-encompassing strategy of stabilisation," it was added.

With regard to promoting principled action, it was said that International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is a highly relevant framework as it provides rules to regulate humanitarian action in situations of armed conflict. It was particularly stressed that the IHL framework is not being sufficiently used in negotiating humanitarian access. Many organisations, especially those who have a broader mandate or mission beyond humanitarian response, have incorporated human rights advocacy in their work. In one of the sessions, the view was raised that pushing a human rights agenda too hard could have negative implications for negotiating access in war. Human Rights Law is aspirational and seeks to identify those who are responsible for abuses, while humanitarian organisations' main motivation is to gain access to populations, regardless of other considerations. **IHL finds a balance between military necessity and humanitarian concerns and, is therefore, a more relevant framework for realising access.** It requires patience and diplomacy, however, to convince governments of the need to abide by the rules of IHL, but it can be a far better approach than penalising them for wanting to remain in control. This responsibility, albeit noble, is for others to take on.

In drawing attention to the relevance of IHL, it was also noted that a process has been initiated to review how the use and application of IHL can be better observed. There is talk of developing a new monitoring mechanism for ensuring better compliance with Conventions.

## FUNDING

Another essential condition for humanitarian response to be effective is the availability of sufficient financial resources. Participants in the three debates were in agreement that **the current system for defining need and consolidating appeals is dysfunctional, if not perverse.** The same agencies appealing for funds are the ones doing the needs assessments. This inherent conflict of interests is made even worse by donors who want to see swollen numbers of affected populations that they can present to their political constituencies. The view was put forward that an incentive exists "to pile up numbers," especially for situations that are of political interest.

Others agreed with this view. Some current appeals promise too much and pretend that humanitarian organisations will deliver on everything, while it is commonly known that this is not going to happen. Other organisations prefer to provide numbers of people whose needs they have assessed and whom they should be able to reach provided that sufficient security conditions and access are available. At the same time, the pressure from donors can be immense. As it was mentioned, "donors need to know the costs of everything and may have difficulty in understanding that costs of a certain operation may be context-specific." The race for donor funds has also created competition among organisations that want to be the first

to get their appeal out.
It is common knowledge that the humanitarian donor landscape is changing quite rapidly with countries such as the Gulf States, Brazil, and others entering the 'market.' Also, countries that were previously recipients of international assistance are now becoming donors, while recent disasters in the US, New Zealand, and Japan demonstrate that developed societies are not immune to crises. **A broader discourse between donors and recipient countries is essential to improving humanitarian action in the present and future.**

At the moment, however, much of the discourse on what constitutes good donorship is still the prerogative of the traditional donor community. Among NGOs, there is a strong feeling that a number of these government donors have prioritised UN agencies in their funding decisions. In their minds, donors prefer large organisations that can absorb significant amounts of funding and are weary of the administrative responsibility that will come with smaller grants shared among a larger group of (smaller) organisations. ECHO is a donor that is well known for its support to NGOs. However, a funding model in which there is a de facto division of roles where individual donor governments provide funding to the UN and ECHO supports the NGO community is seen as undesirable. NGOs will need to demonstrate their capacity to raise private funds.

Another issue frequently raised in the debates was the ever-increasing donor reporting requirements. Especially since the financial crisis that hit many Western economies, donor sentiments on efficiency and results have become prominent and are largely reflected in the concept of "value for money." The discussion surrounding value for money derives from the greater public scrutiny to demonstrate results from foreign aid. Donors, in turn, pass on this pressure to humanitarian organisations on the ground. Value for money tends to include elements of the cost-effectiveness of results. Humanitarian aid is intended for those in need without discrimination. Nevertheless, responding to the needs of people who are in more remote locations or more difficult to access clearly has financial implications for operations, but their needs are just as urgent and deserving of assistance and protection as those in easy-to-reach places with low transaction costs. There is great reluctance within donors, however, to accept that a humanitarian operation can cost up to three times more depending on the local context in terms of environment and transport constraints. It has also led to a desire to develop "unit costs," a formula calculating what each live saved costs per crisis that can be used to determine future budgets.

**The desire for more control and accountability has translated into more burdensome administrative requirements** for the partner organisations of many donor governments - requirements that force these organisations to spend more time on paperwork, drawing human resources away from operational capacity. In the quest for more donor control, there may be excessive demands for more indicators. The view was expressed, however, that these demands are no longer helpful in assessing effectiveness. "It becomes unmanageable and no longer transparent," it was noted.

Admittedly, donors recognise that there is room for improvement on their side too, for example in terms of harmonising donor requirements. Unfortunately, it turns out that many donors continue to have their own views and requirements in terms of what they need. For a number of donors, smaller humanitarian budgets mean that they have fewer staff, who may lack the capacity to review the reports or even not able to follow up properly on everything they request from their partners. There seems to be uncertainty and unclarity as to what donors need to know, and how they put this knowledge to use in their decision-making.

Evaluations are another way to ensure accountability. In the course of the Hard

RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE WHO ARE IN MORE REMOTE LOCATIONS OR MORE DIFFICULT TO ACCESS CLEARLY HAS FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR OPERATIONS, BUT THEIR NEEDS ARE JUST AS URGENT


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Talk debates, it was mentioned that the evaluation function in organisations remains an important one, but that there may be less and less time to digest evaluation outcomes. Ensuring **the right balance between operational capacity and focus and accountability and evaluations** is considered to improve aid effectiveness.

## HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND DEVELOPMENT

The relationship between humanitarian response and development aid has been a long-standing, hotly debated issue. Whether humanitarian response has to pave the way for sustainable development or whether it is a stand-alone set of activities that seek to save lives, makes a significant difference in measuring effectiveness.

Using development standards to measure humanitarian effectiveness may present a distorted picture, as humanitarian response and development aid do not necessarily work to achieve similar results. A classic distinction is that humanitarian response is focused on the population, while development processes seek to support the government and national development programmes.

In the course of the three debates it was frequently noted that there is pressure on humanitarians to take up more activities than those that are strictly humanitarian. Humanitarians often have to pick up the slack that others do not want responsibility for, or for which funding and international support is not easy to obtain.

Humanitarian action is conceived to be for short-term interventions in emergency situations, but often provided year after year in unresolved protracted crises, like Darfur, Somalia or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, crises which continue to absorb most of the humanitarian budget. Furthermore, the food crisis in the Horn of Africa in 2011 has led some humanitarian actors to support the idea that humanitarian action also has a role to play in preventing crises – especially cyclical crises such as famine.

Resilience-building is one example of a development concept that has been pushed on the humanitarian agenda, whereas, in reality, the humanitarian role in resilience is very small. Clearly, humanitarians have a responsibility to re-think their short-term intervention programmes and look at how food-water-sanitation and health assistance can contribute to strengthening resilience and sustainability of communities. It was stated, however, that **most of what humanitarians have to do in terms of contributing to resilience is to push others, in particular their development colleagues, "to pick stuff up."** Although there is always the temptation for humanitarians to do more, "if you push everything on the humanitarian agenda, we will lose the ability to do our work," it was said.

This said, the boundary between humanitarian and development work is not always easy to draw. The discussion as to what falls within the realm of humanitarian action and what does not will remain a perennial issue and determining the effectiveness of humanitarian action is therefore even more complicated.

## HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION AND DIVERSITY

With an ever-growing humanitarian community, overlapping and duplication of efforts are potential risks making coordination even more necessary, especially in light of scarce resources and funding. Several participants pushed the need for stronger coordination, especially on the part of the UN system, which as one participant noted "needed to put their house in order." The Syria crisis is a particular case in point where UN agencies have been bickering on who leads the coordination effort. "Working closer together is part of effectiveness," it was said.

Much has been improved in terms of shared needs analyses, sharing information, and providing more accurate data on the needs on the ground. Tools have been developed and mechanisms, such as clusters, have been established. This system created by "traditional" humanitarian actors, made up of the UN agencies, Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and NGOs, is creating a gap with the "emerging" humanitarian actors that come from countries which do not have much tradition in international humanitarian response.

Somehow it had been expected that new humanitarian actors, especially those from the Gulf countries and Muslim world, would have lesser difficulty in achieving access to areas, which are off limits to organisations that may be perceived as having a Western affiliation. This is not necessarily the case and one situation was mentioned in which the local population did not accept that religion would serve as an entry point for providing assistance.

WHILE NEWER HUMANITARIAN ACTORS MAY BE LESS FAMILIAR WITH BEST PRACTICE IN THE WAY TRADITIONAL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS VIEW IT, NEITHER TRADITIONAL NOR EMERGING HUMANITARIAN ACTORS CAN CLAIM TO ABIDE BY BEST PRACTICE ACROSS THE BOARD

While newer humanitarian actors may be less familiar with best practice in the way traditional humanitarian actors view it, neither traditional nor emerging humanitarian actors can claim to abide by best practice across the board. Furthermore, traditional and emerging humanitarian actors hold misconceptions about each other, which act as a barrier to developing the closer ties that are needed to improve humanitarian effectiveness. These misunderstandings and stereotypes will not be overcome overnight, but require a longer commitment to developing mutual trust.

Certification of humanitarian organisations may drive a further wedge between the traditional system and newer actors. Views differ as to whether or not certification will provide a solution to achieving higher quality and more effectiveness. Some believe that it will not prevent situations such as the one in the Haiti earthquake response from happening. In this situation, many 'mom-and-pop' organisations showed up which have little expertise in providing professional and high quality services. **Although standardisation may see improved efficiency, it was also noted that the door should remain open for newcomers.** This is even more important in countries where civil society needs to be strengthened and new NGOs need to be supported and encouraged, it was said.

Although much scepticism remains with regard to certification and standardisation, **the question is whether or not there are limits to diversity.** As one speaker noted, the plan was never "to get a humanitarian system which grows everyday like the solar system, it was basically designed as a provisional structure pending capacity of states to deal with themselves."

Another set of actors that is increasingly becoming active in humanitarian crises is the private sector. The involvement of the private sector in humanitarian aid also presents risks and opportunities. In particular, it is important to clearly establish the desired

THERE IS NOT ONE SINGLE WAY TO DO HUMANITARIAN WORK AND A SPACE WILL NEED TO BE DEFINED THAT GIVES ROOM TO THE ‘MANY FACES OF HUMANITARIANISM’

outcome at the outset of partnerships with the private sector and avoid rushing into collaboration. **Many public-private partnerships fail because the collaboration has not been thoroughly thought through.** Participants in the Humanitarian HardTalk series also stressed that humanitarian organisations should not be surprised by the private sector expecting to benefit from the partnership.

As mentioned earlier, the World Humanitarian Summit is expected to serve as a platform where traditional humanitarian actors and newer actors can engage with each other. Through a series of preparatory meetings and consultations, the aim is to develop the summit as a process that seeks to create a better understanding and interaction among the various and diverse actors that make up the humanitarian community. There is not one single way to do humanitarian work and a space will need to be defined that gives room to the ‘many faces of humanitarianism.’ After all, many are the players who will need to work together to make aid count in the future.

## ABOUT AECID

AECID is the governing body for Spanish policy on international development cooperation, and its fundamental aim is to promote, manage and implement public policies for international development cooperation, with particular emphasis on reducing poverty and achieving sustainable human development in developing countries, as defined in each four-yearly AECID Master Plan. Combating poverty is the ultimate goal of Spanish policy for international development cooperation, as part of Spain's overall foreign policy, and AECID's actions are based on the belief that interdependence and solidarity are essential elements of international society. For more information: **www.aecid.es**

## ABOUT DARA

DARA is an independent non-profit organisation committed to improving the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action for vulnerable populations affected by armed conflict and natural disasters. Through research and evaluations, we encourage organisations to reflect on the impact of their work and help them take evidence-based decisions at the policy, strategy and programming levels, and in critical moments of delivering assistance. DARA actively promotes humanitarian principles, learning and accountability and supports innovative approaches. For more information: **www.daraint.org**