

Editorial: Knowing when and how to disengage humanitarian response

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The machinery of international humanitarian response, once triggered and functioning in a country, has a life of its own. A multiplicity of United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organizations set up their programmes. The various sector- or subject-focused ‘clusters’, established to strengthen pre-emergency preparedness and operational coordination once an emergency has occurred, are activated. Humanitarian response plans are published, and appeals for funds made.

On the ground, the visible signs and signals of humanitarian response are inescapable – hundreds of Land Cruisers sporting the logos of their organizations; the multi-pocketed khaki gilets and the high-vis vests; the smartphones, tablets, and data platforms for monitoring and enumeration; the distributions of so-called ‘non-food items’ or ‘core relief items’; the satellite phones and radios; and much other paraphernalia.

It is undoubtedly the case that humanitarian response, together with coordinated and professional systems and standards, is needed in many places of our troubled world. The 2021 mid-year update of the United Nations Global Humanitarian Overview identifies 37 countries or regions where active response is taking place, to assist 238 million people in need, requiring funding of US\$35.9 billion.

Humanitarian response of this type is fundamentally unsustainable, and it tends to bypass governments’ own development policies, strategies, and plans. Worse still, it can create damaging dependencies as a result of a free-handout mentality, and it can undermine local markets and enterprise. Ideally it should be deployed for as short a time as possible, before a return to strengthened and adequately resourced national systems.

There has been much debate going back over four decades or more about how to ‘link relief, rehabilitation, and development’. Thinking has moved on from the simple idea of a *continuum* – each stage of humanitarian response moving steadily forward in a linear fashion – to an understanding that emergency response, rehabilitation, and long-term development may all need to happen simultaneously – sometimes referred to as a *contiguum*. Chronic poverty that is punctuated by periodic crises and conflicts, and natural, political, and economic disasters all makes for a very complex working environment.

And yet the question remains: when should, when *must*, short-term projects and free handouts end, to allow some semblance of normality to resume? For one thing is clear, UN agencies and NGOs lurching from one short project to the next, drilling boreholes, handing out buckets and water purification tablets, and ‘rehabilitating’ defunct water points, while perhaps being necessary in the very short term, is *not* normal.

All these debates and questions are uppermost in my mind as I write this, having returned to the UK from South Sudan a few days ago. There I found a national water ministry eager to play its part in developing the country's water and sanitation services, and a similar appetite for work at the state and local authority levels. But I also found the many humanitarian agencies doing well-meaning but ultimately unsustainable work; and the longer they continue, the harder it gets for communities and households to return to any sense of autonomy, responsibility, and capability.

I found some frustration among government, the international agencies, and NGOs about the situation, but a realistic recognition that once the humanitarian system is entrenched, there is a strong resistance to change. This reluctance to break the aid habit makes us all contributors to the problem, rather than becoming part of the solution.

The politics of humanitarian assistance and development cooperation is extremely complex, and, as someone has astutely observed, power tends to flow upstream to money. This being the case, those who hold the purse-strings should arguably be taking a lead in transitioning from humanitarian to sustainable development mindsets. It is hard for the smaller players, including national governments, to resist the system.

In South Sudan, there is still sporadic conflict in a few places, but other parts of the country are peaceful and in need of carefully designed partnerships for sustainable development – not a continuation of short-term projects and free handouts. If ever there was a good example of the need for a *contiguum* approach, this country is one. But it is not alone.

It is easily forgotten that in nearly all countries, those very households and communities which humanitarian assistance and sustainable development programmes try to help make no such programmatic distinction. For such people, life and livelihoods go on. They may be interrupted by more or less frequent crises, and so people have to *simultaneously* deal both with life's everyday struggles and with the impacts of so-called 'shocks' or 'trends'. Perhaps the international humanitarian and sustainable development cooperation machinery would be more effective if these two very different approaches could learn to do the same.

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Reference

UN (2021) 'Global humanitarian overview 2021: mid-year update' [pdf], United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GHO_Monthly_Update_21JUNE2021.pdf> [accessed 1 July 2021].