

Beyond humanitarian aid: Connecting the dots with development

Written by: Cyprien Fabre, OECD Development Co-operation Directorate

Last update: 12 August 2019



Drought, floods, earthquakes, conflict, climate change: these are just some of the areas which humanitarian assistance is traditionally called on to address. Policymakers tend to consider short-term humanitarian assistance and longer-term development assistance quite separately, yet they are two sides of the same coin. As we mark the annual World Humanitarian Day on 19 August, the OECD Lives in Crisis project provides some food for thought.

Today's humanitarian crises and conflicts are more complex than in the past. They last longer, generate massive population displacement and do not develop in smooth, linear ways. Shocks such as climate change can have an impact on many different areas simultaneously, from food security and health to political

and social stability. As a result, the need for emergency assistance is increasingly overlapping with long-term development needs: there is no longer a specific point in time when people's needs cease to be "humanitarian" and instead become linked to "development".

Humanitarian needs are tied to development needs. In fact, they are often a direct reflection of the most serious development challenges. In fact, humanitarian aid may not necessarily be the best instrument to meet people's needs in crisis contexts. Despite this, the current international system relies almost exclusively on the provision of short-term, emergency humanitarian aid whenever a crisis occurs.

The scale, complexity and longevity of most crises are straining today's mechanisms for designing and funding humanitarian interventions. Indeed, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit called for a new, holistic paradigm for conceiving, programming and delivering humanitarian assistance. Three years later, there is still much to do to fully implement the reforms agreed at the summit, as the OECD "Lives in crises" project demonstrates.

Together with its partner, Ground Truth Solutions, the OECD interviewed over 12,000 people either affected by crises or working as humanitarian field workers since 2016. Respondents were interviewed about their perceptions in seven different country contexts, all of which present different crises patterns, namely in Haiti, Lebanon, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Uganda and Bangladesh.

The project gathered a number of striking findings. First, aid workers and aid recipients differed sharply on their perceptions of whether or not aid was fairly distributed. Humanitarian workers were confident that aid was going to those who need it most. In stark contrast, aid recipients responded that it was not. They argued that people lacking political or social power, including those with illnesses, the elderly, and remote and undocumented individuals, do not always receive the aid they need.

The interviews also highlighted that humanitarian assistance represents only a part of what individuals require. People affected by crises cannot live exclusively on humanitarian assistance; it is insufficient to cover their basic needs. After the initial emergency phase, they generally need to find other sources of income, a livelihood, or otherwise resort to other measures, such as leaving school or accruing debt.

If humanitarian assistance is not sufficient to meet people's core needs, it is even less effective in helping people achieve economic self-sufficiency. People in crisis contexts surveyed by the OECD and Ground Truth Solutions consistently mentioned their lack of economic and livelihood opportunities as a primary grievance. In the protracted crises that make up most humanitarian contexts, affected people want financial autonomy, not prolonged assistance. People in crisis contexts want to work, for their dignity and well-being. Humanitarian

assistance is not designed to put an end to need, but to sustain people through times of need. In addition, humanitarian aid is often unpredictable in nature. Longer-term approaches should be mobilised in order to enable an environment in which people affected by crises are able to earn a living.

Meeting people's needs requires listening to them and understanding their own views on what their needs are and whether they are being met, and it also demands that we consider carefully how we define a crisis in the first place. For instance, although both political crises and natural disasters can create humanitarian needs, labelling them as "humanitarian" does not incite decision-makers to engage with anything other than humanitarian assistance.

Yet policymakers require a range of instruments that include, but are not limited to, humanitarian assistance. They also need to mobilise development and peace assistance, and use levers such as political dialogue, multilateralism, development co-operation, peacebuilding or stabilisation measures, and engage the private sector too. And players operating in these areas must work together in order to be most effective.

This "nexus", where people working in humanitarian aid, development and peace areas collaborate, is described in a recent recommendation from the OECD Development Assistance Committee. Activating this nexus requires reaching beyond humanitarian aid. How donors operate, the administrative processes in countries and any aversion to engaging public money in risky contexts all make it hard to marshal resources for anything other than short-term humanitarian budgets delivered through big, trusted humanitarian partners with both expertise and absorption capacity. Overcoming these stubborn divides is a challenge. Clearly, we must enable all partners to define, in each crisis context and at different points in time, the tools that are best for the problem at hand and how best to wield them together.

Humanitarian assistance works as a temporary painkiller, but cannot treat the underlying cause. To work properly, humanitarian policy responses should by default be part of a broader, collaborative plan, using the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

©OECD Observer August 2019

References

OECD (2019), DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, OECD Legal Instruments, OECD, Paris <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5019>

OECD (2019), Lives in Crises: What Do People Tell Us About the Humanitarian Aid They Receive?, OECD Publishing, Paris <https://doi.org/10.1787/9d39623d-en>

For more on World Humanitarian Day www.unocha.org/world-humanitarian-day-2019