
The humanitarian-development gap

by
JONATHAN MOORE

AMONG the major issues arising from humanitarian action is the separation or, if you wish, the unrealized symbiosis between emergency relief assistance and sustainable development. What lies between these traditional realms can be called rehabilitation (for lack of a better term; more about semantics below) and is most often experienced in crisis-prone countries stunted by poverty and torn by conflict. There are currently over 30 such countries in the grip of situations that the United Nations calls “complex emergencies”. These emergencies have multiplied owing to the concurrence of a number of factors including the end of the Cold War, the outbreak of previously inhibited ethnic hostility, weapons proliferation, the advancement of information technology, the erosion of inviolate sovereignty, the stubbornness of under development, and the snail’s pace of democratization.

The middle ground of rehabilitation is very messy. It is characterized by fragility, inexperience, anxiety, confusion and political myopia. The interdependency of emergency life-saving and livelihood-building, the need for follow-on social and economic progress to prevent the squandering of humanitarian assistance, is not reflected by a natural dynamic of mutual reinforcement in the policies and programmes of the international

JONATHAN MOORE is adviser to the United Nations Development Programme and associate at the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, at Harvard University in the United States. He is the editor of *Hard Choices – Moral dilemmas in humanitarian intervention* (*infra*, p. 182).

community and the recipient governments. To the contrary, humanitarian and development organizations tend to compete with one another for money, turf and credit, almost more as adversaries than collaborators. The rhetoric of partnership is put to shame by the reality of competition among those involved. This makes it all the more difficult to meet the huge challenges in these countries: rebuilding physical and social infrastructure, reintegrating returning populations, strengthening grass-roots governance and civil society, maintaining security while developing a justice system, reconciliation – all of which must be addressed simultaneously.

To understand better the reasons for this situation and how it might be improved, it is helpful to consider three fundamental points. The first is the powerful difference generally obscured between humanitarian aid and rehabilitation. The former is politically popular, well financed, largely implemented by outsiders, relatively quick and relatively easy. The latter is politically dubious, inadequately funded, essentially carried out by recipients, takes longer, and is more difficult.

The second basic point is that there are inadequacies in the language used to categorize these evolving circumstances which can lead to confusion rather than greater clarity, keeping in mind that semantics are open to manipulation and certain interests are served more by uncertainty than agreement. The term humanitarian means at its root the characteristics of human beings, both good and bad. But it has come to refer to the more attractive aspects of the species, the more virtuous and selfless, the ‘better angels of our nature’. The word no longer covers the petty, ignoble and demonic. “Humanitarianism” accordingly means doing good works, being compassionate, behaving like the good Samaritan. Deriving from this positive conceptualization of human nature are the norms of international humanitarian law codified in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their two 1977 Additional Protocols, which protect non-combatants amidst armed conflict.

In a programmatic context, humanitarian aid became consonant with the relief of human suffering: food, tents, medicine and protection. Later, amidst talk of a continuum and the growing recognition that there had to be some strategy and action to go beyond treating symptoms and to address root causes, the international community began using the label “humanitarian” in a less restricted context. Now the so-called humanitarian agencies, some of which have been involved in rehabilitation activities for

a long time and are perhaps planning more, are using a less restrictive definition, one encompassing development (although hopefully not all the way to including some of our nastier qualities).

The third underlying point is the psychology of both the enormous nature of the challenge and the inadequate response to it. The prodigious difficulty of the task facing the international community – UN agencies, NGOs, “bilateral” efforts on behalf of and in league with the afflicted societies – in attempting to treat wounds, heal emotions and build capacity into something capable of improving chances for survival, is profoundly underestimated. This is because the scale of that task truly staggers the imagination, because it can be debilitating to admit the big troubles and the long odds involved, and because we are unwilling to commit the means needed to get the job done. Almost subconsciously our perceptions and policies are oversimplified and downsized in order to prevent us being intimidated or overwhelmed and to permit the illusion that what we are providing is enough. Of course there is a cost in not recognizing the enormity of the endeavour: with insufficient will and resources that endeavour will fail. And when real progress is not achieved quickly, then those involved not only become frustrated but also angry and cynical, more inclined to cast blame and less to practise patience, wisdom and mutual respect needed to bridge the humanitarian-development gap.

At the local level, there are many obstacles and shortcomings in the rehabilitation and transitional programmes being run by international organizations, programmes which can link the forward part of humanitarian aid to the early part of development efforts. Among these obstacles are the chaotic multiplicity of needs, programmes and entities involved; the natural institutional resistance to role demarcation and coordination of those on the ground, whether multilateral, bilateral or national; the weakness of bodies, mechanisms or procedures designed to achieve complementarity; the disinclination of outside parties to invest responsibility in the indigenous ones (despite the former’s protestations to the contrary), thus missing the opportunity for a common and integrated strategy based on internal culture, politics and capacity rather than on interests and controls imposed from without; and the accompanying mentality that looks for solutions rather than progress. Humanitarian agencies do not design their work adequately to meet long-term goals; development organizations fail to design theirs to deal with fragile and volatile circumstances. But most of the problems here come

from outside, from the donor capitals and from the upper reaches of the UN family.

It is difficult to criticize the donors: they hold the purse strings, they have many other problems and they cannot do everything. Moreover, though gratifying in some instances it can be counterproductive to bite the hand that feeds you. But they are the heart of the matter in bridging the gap we are discussing. Although the individual national donors have good intentions, they are too often stymied politically. Their unexceptionable rhetoric continues but remains unmatched by action. It masks reality and serves as a substitute for addressing it.

Part of the problem donors have in dealing with transitional societies is that there is a virtual contradiction between the requirements for this kind of assistance and their own stubborn habits: an impatient, short-term mentality; a focus on band-aid measures instead of steps to address the root causes of problems; too much emphasis on their own interests and techniques rather than relying on local resources; and a misplaced passion for “instant democracy”. Another difficulty is the void between officials at the lower bureaucratic levels and in the field – whose job it is to know what they are doing and with whom, to comprehend the specifics and to take practical action – and those at higher political levels in capitals, people whose incentive-and-reward system emphasizes the need to accommodate other interests and priorities and to deal with macropolicies for which details simply get in the way.

Donors tie their aid to domestic economics and domestic politics in ways ranging from the bothersome to the deplorable, but this is neither new or surprising and it pervades foreign aid rather than being particular to the link between emergency and development support. Rehabilitation assistance aimed at effecting a transition from fierce crisis to a viable future remains politically unsalient. It is not as simple, striking or gratifying as dispatching relief aid, or cruise missiles for that matter. And even structural adjustment, macro economic reform, trade balances, reserve levels, debt relief, capital investment and long-term loans (the business of the bankers and finance ministries), however difficult, has more history, priority and control and less risk and uncertainty behind it.

The donors thus do not provide the cooperation, discipline or coordination so vital for rationalizing the middle ground we are discussing. Nor do they give the matter the priority it requires. This applies both to the

donors themselves and to the multilateral agencies whom they fund and who must respect their wishes. The top UN leadership, its Secretariat departments and the governing bodies for its funds, programmes and specialized agencies simply do not receive a forceful and persistent message from the donor community to the effect that they must stop their quarrelling and competition and work together for the good of the whole. The recent effort at UN reform was promoted by donors who (except when it came to down-sizing and down-funding) eventually abandoned their support for serious consolidation and coordination of the major units of the UN system responsible for countries in the grip of complex emergencies. The opportunity was lost for role allocation and mutual reinforcement. Dissonance, self-interest, competition and the ambition to do too much individually are largely unfettered. There is no shared view which is active and operationalized of a common whole, insufficient leadership to provide it, and therefore little inclination to attain it. To some degree, this is everybody's quandary, but it is above all the donors who are responsible for the problem of the humanitarian-development gap and who are the best hope for its solution.

Résumé

L'écart entre l'humanitaire et le développement

par JONATHAN MOORE

L'auteur de cet article se penche sur les liens qui existent entre l'assistance dans des situations d'urgence et d'autres formes d'assistance, notamment les réponses aux « situations d'urgence complexes ». Il examine certains des obstacles qui font qu'il est si difficile, dans la pratique, de passer de l'assistance d'urgence à une aide à moyen terme (réhabilitation). Après avoir souligné le rôle important qu'ils devraient jouer dans ces efforts, il appelle les donateurs à mieux assumer leurs responsabilités.

LA REVUE