

## Towards a "global humanitarian compact" - a role for the L20?

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Humanitarian aid, as part of overseas development assistance, is big business. But, of the major worldwide public endeavours, the financing of the global humanitarian system is among the most primitive, based on little rationality and even less accountability. The result is that, for millions of victims of catastrophe and conflict, their life chances depend on a lottery. But this is not even an ordinary lottery where the natural laws of chance prevail. The humanitarian dice often spins in strangely whimsical directions, depending on whether you happen to be a Tsunami survivor who has somehow triggered the world's compassion in a most extraordinary manner, or an earthquake victim languishing away in Kashmir. Not surprising, when we still argue about what constitutes humanitarian action, who needs humanitarian help, how much should we give, when do we know when the job has been well done or even when enough has been done, and how do we move on?

This is not to say that we are doing nothing. Never has the business of caring been so popular. Never has the global humanitarian industry been so busy, as now. The search for bureaucratic refinement and fine-tuning the rituals of the humanitarian enterprise continues to engage the finest brains. Pursuing the holy grail of humanitarian coordination is the most noble duty of the any up-and-coming humanitarian today. It is satisfying to know that our declarations, guidelines, action plans and appeals are becoming more and more refined in their eloquence and elegance. And we can sleep soundly, not only because we work hard, but because of our sacred humanitarian principles: comfortably garbed in the cloak of *humanity*, snug in our cocoon of *neutrality*, protected by the shield of *impartiality*, and armed with the spear of *independence*.....today's humanitarian warrior is truly a wonder to behold.

So why the malaise? The more charitable critics would say that contemporary humanitarianism has lost its way. At the heart of the malaise is the lack of a vision that is simple enough for people to understand, credible enough for people to believe in, important enough to mobilise their commitment, and bold enough to fire the world's imagination and generate the passion - without which nothing big is ever achieved.

Such a vision - worthy enough for the Leaders of the 20 most important countries on the planet - could be simply put: that **by 2015, we commit ourselves to**

**provide the basic humanitarian needs of 90% of people affected by conflicts and disasters.** This would be a **new global humanitarian compact.** The inspiration behind this idea is, of course, the Millennium Declaration – possibly the greatest concept – since the founding of the UN itself. Para 11 of the Millennium Declaration, agreed by the world says...“we will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected...”. This is, of course, not achievable, without attending, as a matter of urgency, to the requirements of the 300 to 400 million people affected by conflicts and disasters. That is the challenge to humanitarians.

We should not be detained too long by arcane arguments over defining humanitarian action, and what is or is not included in the humanitarian package. The job has been done for us: by means of the specific targets that have been agreed under the MGs that apply universally, including in situations characterised by disaster and conflict. **The bold expectation behind this concept is that with the knowledge, technologies, and wealth at our disposal, it should be possible to aspire to a major degree of "disaster proofing" of vulnerable populations.** This means attending to both risks and vulnerabilities as well as mitigating the consequences of disaster and conflict.

In doing so, we can be quite precise in setting benchmarks for defining needs as well as measuring impact - through adopting specific indicators for humanitarian action derived from those that have already been agreed by the world for global poverty reduction. This does not mean that humanitarian action is simply reduced to being a subset of development – but both are informed by a shared perspective. Examples of suitable humanitarian indicators include:

- Prevalence of underweight children, (under-five years of age)
- Proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption
- Under-five mortality rate
- Infant mortality rate
- Proportion of 1 year old children immunised against measles
- Maternal mortality ratio
- HIV prevalence among 15-24 year old pregnant women
- Contraceptive prevalence rate
- Proportion of population with sustainable access to an improved water source
- Proportion of people with access to improved sanitation
- Proportion of people with access to adequate shelter<sup>1</sup>

(These indicators could be reduced to five major headline indicators that are most sensitive to risk/vulnerability - following technical work that is currently underway).

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<sup>1</sup> This is an adapted version of indicator 31 of the MDGs

These indicators are literally measuring the chances of life and death – which is surely at the heart of the humanitarian business. The priority task for humanitarians in a particular situation is then first and foremost to ensure that the status of conflict and disaster affected groups as measured by these indicators is brought up to the level enjoyed by non-affected population in the country or region.

Humanitarian programming strategies follow logically from this by asking the following questions: what are the policies necessary to achieve the targets? What are the arrangements to access and serve the affected populations? What are the partnerships and capacities that need to be developed and sustained – so that needs are satisfied, not just in technical terms, but also in a way that promotes human dignity. What are the resources that need to be mobilised and harnessed together?

The advantage of using the MG framework for humanitarian action is that it allows smooth post-crisis transition to recovery and beyond, by avoiding the relief-development gap. This is because the Millennium Goals are also the basis for the poverty reduction strategy process (PRSP) that succeeds humanitarian appeals, and provides the longer-term framework for development co-operation.

In this scenario, good humanitarian donorship means signing up to the global humanitarian compact to meet all humanitarian needs as defined by the framework of specific indicators outline above. Not here and there, not now and then, but everywhere, and every-time. Rough calculations indicate that, if we define humanitarian action as doing what is necessary to achieve the mortality, nutrition, and health targets to approx 300 - 400 million people affected by conflicts and disasters, it is possible to meet the 90% target by 2015 by an additional US\$2 billion annually, on top of the current global humanitarian spend of approx. US\$6 billion. We can afford this, if we have the will, and if we are minded to make the effort to organise the spend along more rational lines.

However, none of this is possible without regaining trust in the international humanitarian system. This will only happen if we give primacy to the moral duty to get the best humanitarian good out of each humanitarian dollar. The test of this is to analyse not just what goods and services are bought with each dollar, but what is the benefit for each dollar spent at the margin, on one type of humanitarian intervention, compared to another type of intervention. This implies having to make trade-offs and choices, and a different way of formulating appeals for donor resources. In turn, this will require **a system that has a degree of separation between the assessment of needs, performance, and impact on one hand, and financing of agencies, on the other hand**. It is not impossible to conceive of a system of independent commissioners (ie. independent of donors as well as host governments, and operational agencies) that could be set up to do this – on a global, regional, or

country-specific basis. This approach would breathe life into the oft-stated principle of independence in humanitarian action.

In such a new humanitarian order, we might have an organisational architecture that is different from now – and possibly radically different. Imagine this different world: where our great humanitarian organisations are only concerned with achieving the most benefit for the maximum number of people; where donors are motivated only by the desire to do good and not to pursue narrow national interests, and where there is fairness and predictability of response. Coordination has a different meaning in such a world – indeed, one might say that we will have moved into the post-coordination world – where we do not need such elaborate and costly bureaucratic arrangements to police the mutual paranoia that characterises the current humanitarian system. This includes the donors who need to take an honest self-examination of their own accountability, and their behaviour in terms of whether or not they are providing the right incentives or sending the right signals to the agencies they fund.

In the ‘post coordination world’, the debate will be more sophisticated than the simply dichotomy of multilateralism versus bilateralism, and we will not complain about (and instead, welcome) the ever-increasing numbers of humanitarian actors. This is because the humanitarian instinct – the urge to help others – is one of the oldest and most noble of human characteristics. It is practiced in many ways in many parts of the world. No single culture or institutional system has the monopoly on humanitarian wisdom. In the new humanitarian order, our institutions would not be prisons to box us in or fortresses to keep others out, but launch pads for yet more creative and ambitious humanitarian enterprise. Indeed, the challenge for the modern humanitarian is to liberate the humanitarian spirit in all who wish to join the humanitarian enterprise. The greatest danger may yet be that we do the opposite ie. suffocate the humanitarian idea by over-institutionalising it.

Why should the L20 expend energy on developing a global humanitarian compact? Because, as crisis after crisis has shown, the humanitarian agenda is closely linked to the security agenda. Furthermore, the perceived Western-centric nature of the current humanitarian enterprise is perceived as divisive, and has lost respect.

In conclusion, the new humanitarian vision can be summarised very easily - it is a return to the most fundamental basics of finding the simplest way to organise *all* who wish to make common cause for *one* shared purpose: **to help, in the most direct way possible, all those afflicted by crisis and catastrophe – everywhere.**

Or, to put this even more simply: it is about putting the HUMAN back in humanitarian.