

# RELIEF, REHABILITATION AND DEVELOPMENT: ARE THE DISTINCTIONS USEFUL?

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The idea of linking relief and development, although current since the mid-1980s, has grown in prominence since the Gulf War and the increasing international preoccupation with humanitarian relief. Nevertheless, within development agencies, the nature of the link between relief and development, and what this might mean in practice, remains far from clear. It is evident that, at the least, the idea of a 'relief development continuum' means very different things to different people. This is true, notwithstanding the current sense in many western development circles that, with the end of the Cold War, we are in a period of a 'new consensus' on international relief and development action. A variety of practical constraints and differences in perspective and ideology remains.

The article touches on four different sources of confusion: the institutional considerations of donor agencies; problems associated with development ideology; the different perspectives of different actors; and the opportunities created by crisis. The sharp distinctions which are made here are not intended to be mutually exclusive. It concludes with an attempt to reconcile perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 SOURCES OF CONFUSION

### 2.1 Organizational considerations

In the post-Gulf War reorganization of the international humanitarian system, very little consideration appears to have been given to the practical limitations on international action. If, for no other reason than the administrative difficulties posed by large budgets and multiple grants to other organizations, the larger Governmental donors tend to impose limits on their support, e.g. through NGOs, to relief, rehabilitation and development activities. The distinctions vary from donor to donor, but typically include limitations on action related to its time relationship with an emergency, and on the type of

activity which is acceptable in relationship at each period. The time limits are sometimes formal: for example, for many years the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance could act only within 90 days of a disaster. In other cases, time limits are decided in relationship to the donors' perception of the evolution of a specific case. The type of activity which is acceptable in any period is generally implicit rather than formally defined, but is usually broadly limited by type. Thus, a proposal for food distribution in a famine would be acceptable 'relief activity'; but it might be difficult or impossible, depending on the sophistication of the donor concerned, to obtain such food in advance of a crisis. Such distinctions and the flexibility of any donor vary widely between donors and with time.

The reasons for this are not only administrative. Donor 'flexibility' is clearly a complex function of the political policy environment of the donor and the confidence and knowledge of donor staff. The increasing demand for public accountability is a factor: more imaginative and effective work is often 'open-ended' and therefore more risky, less accountable and less acceptable. In high profile emergencies, there is a need for donors to be seen to satisfy the western public interest (sometimes ahead of that of the recipient).

In the current period, when the donor field increasingly dominated by a small number of large donors and an increasing number of NGOs are largely or entirely dependent on donor financing to work at all, the definitions of 'relief', 'development' and the transition between these is increasingly defined by the donor position. At the extremes an 'emergency' might not be deemed to exist at all i.e. does not qualify for funding, if bilateral relationships are sufficiently bad (e.g. the US Government and northern Sudan); or it might last for a shorter or longer time according to the procedures of the donor concerned.

<sup>1</sup> The note is unreferenced for the reason that to the best of the author's knowledge the origin of many of these views is obscure – some, for example, have been current within the author's own

agency (SCF (UK)) for at least a decade and underpin much of its dealings with other agencies and relief action – and because others are discussed at greater length in other articles.

These donor distinctions have practical implications. The absolute cost of international relief tends to be very high, and the return on the investment, so far as this can be judged, poor. Most money is spent on salaries and material which is immediately consumed. Furthermore, relief is also, in some instances, grossly inefficient in terms of improving the welfare of the affected population. For example, the course of the recent cholera epidemic in Goma, which on the available estimate led to 17,000 deaths from a population of 1 million, appears to have been at best only marginally influenced by massive international action. In the face of the recent huge increase in the absolute cost of emergencies, there is an obvious interest in reducing costs and improving the efficiency of response.

There is, of course, a long history of attempts to get better return on the relief investment, ranging from the comparatively trivial, e.g. siting and designing a relief water supply in such a way that it will have value to the resident population after the emergency, to the more important question of methods of 'relief' which prevent disaster. The most common case relates to 'economic emergencies' and specifically the possibility of reducing the vulnerability of some populations to anticipated food crisis.

The typical situation is of a population affected by production failure from drought, where, to survive, people will sell their livestock and other capital and where some may require food aid to survive. A case can be made that the provision of food aid before the population is forced to realize capital would sometimes involve much lower absolute costs, be more 'economic' and more effective than intervention after the event. For example, rough calculations after the Darfur famine in 1985/86 (with Alex de Waal), suggested that a smaller quantity of food aid delivered early would have avoided the 'panic' sale of livestock of a much greater value than the cost of the relief operation, allowed the population to retain its livestock, and reduced their vulnerability to drought in subsequent years.

The routine practical implementation of such techniques is of course more difficult - where, when and how to intervene is a complex question - but there are examples of the use of such techniques, for example the purchase of cattle at subsidized rates in Mali in the mid 1980s, where otherwise these would have been to the owner a total loss. A different but current case is the building and improvement of

roads in the remoter famine prone areas of northern Ethiopia. This could not be justified in conventional economic terms; but would be easily justified in terms of the huge savings in relief costs which will be obtained, when, as is likely, crisis returns to that area.

## 2.2 Current ideas on development

'Donor' definitions can be seen from another perspective, in which there is no smooth continuum from relief to development: they are simply different things. The current dominant 'model' for development is to be found in the theory underlying the actions of the IMF and World Bank, i.e. in the attempt to secure wealth creation within poor countries rather than wealth transfer from rich countries to poor, largely practiced through 'economic structural adjustment'. In this construction, the idea of a temporal succession from relief to development does not exist - they are different and essentially dissociated activities, which require different conditions to succeed. This distinction seems also to be accepted implicitly in the new UN institutional arrangements, which increasingly deal with relief as an activity distinct from and in terms of structure and control disconnected from, 'development'.

The case of Angola provides an example. The recent savage 'second' war between the MPLA Government and UNITA caused localized but large scale starvation. At about the same time the country was subjected to a sharp currency revaluation as part of 'economic structural adjustment'. The result, by early 1994, was a situation where malnutrition was on the decline and all but set to disappear in areas receiving relief; while in the vast urban slums in the capital and the coastal cities, well outside the war zone, an already severe level of poverty grew worse, with a steady increase in rates of severe malnutrition.

The juxtaposition of large sums being spent to feed one group - food is delivered by air - where another starves, is uncomfortable: but under the prevailing economic theory the two actions are not necessarily incompatible. 'Development' in, say, Huambo, a UNITA held relief enclave, will occur as and if wider conditions allow: the end of war and the resumption of trade and access to agricultural inputs, reinvestment in light industry, and the ability of a Government to support education and health services. These in turn depend on the political and economic environment in the country at large and beyond. There is no evident connection between the supply of food aid and medical relief to people isolated by a

war, a purely temporary measure, and the poverty and under-nutrition of compatriots in areas not directly affected by conflict.

In Angola it might be argued that relief, rehabilitation and development are happening simultaneously and independently. Leaving on one side the questions of the effectiveness of structural adjustment, the practical reality or effectiveness of 'safety nets', and the problems of debt servicing, the case that the IMF/World Bank have found a clear and logical 'relief-development' continuum of their own is a strong one.

### **2.3 Different perspectives**

A developing country Government, a community group or an individual, are likely to have rather different views on the definitions of and practical relationships between relief and development to those of the larger donors.

For example, all parties may agree that a particular drought or conflict has affected people in a way which justifies relief: but the nature and balance of concern will vary with the observer. The 'foreign' interest may be from the perspective of starvation - the public concern from the media exposure of starvation or foreign policy considerations; the National Government may acknowledge this but be chiefly concerned with the effects of the crisis on the economy; and people may fear hardship, impoverishment or destitution, rather than the statistically small risk of death.

Where power lies with the donor, the relief response may be, as in Angola, in terms of food aid. Where, as in India, Government has its own resources and has been free to act independently of donors, the relief response may include the distribution of free - or subsidized - food, but will generally centre on the need to protect incomes, the market and larger capital investments. For example in the drought of the mid-1980s, the State of Gujarat spent immense sums on the procurement and transportation of fodder to protect milk herds, an investment which if lost would take years to regain and (from the failure of milk supply to urban areas) have immense political cost. It is the author's impression that a competent national perspective on the 'continuum' is generally broadly the reverse of the international view i.e. for governments, 'disasters' are primarily 'economic' in importance; for the external world 'human'.

The local perspective on appropriate disaster relief and 'development' has had many major successes, particularly outside Africa. The great storm-surge disasters which have struck coastal Bangladesh have caused deaths in the hundreds of thousands and are typically seen by outside agencies as 'natural' disasters, having primarily an immediate human effect. But, paradoxically, flood surges create relatively slight short term medical and other relief needs. People are killed or survive, and there is often little immediate medical need other than short term rescue and first aid. The effects are primarily economic and can be managed as such by the distribution of cash and/or the intensification of 'normal' development activities, support for the re-capitalization of the normal domestic economy and the replacement of public capital, for example the provision of housing materials, seeds and tools, tube wells etc. Such activities are, of course, often supported by international donors and NGOs. The distinction between relief and development in such cases may be a very fine one: the very short-term problem of rescue aside, the type of activity involved may be little or no different to that associated with 'development'.

### **2.4 Crisis creating the conditions for development**

The possibility that crisis may create the conditions for development has been advanced, chiefly in the context of the Eritrean/Ethiopian war. Here it is argued that one effect of the social and political reorganization associated with war was to emancipate women and to create new social conditions and possibilities for development. The case is not disputed here except to say that this does not seem to be a general phenomenon associated with war, and may reflect as much the particular and unusual history of Northern Ethiopia prior to the war. More widely, the question of the effect of previous disasters on subsequent economic development is an interesting one and clearly relevant to a view of the relief-development continuum. Sound evidence is slight and the nature of the argument does not allow proof: but it is the author's impression that there is a case that, as far as generalization is possible, it is that crisis tends to accelerate processes already underway prior to the emergency. This seems logical - a place which is in economic decline from want of a market for its produce, suitable skills or a remote location is hardly likely to be stimulated into growth after, say, an earthquake and a rehabilitation involving the replacement of housing, basic domestic equipment and a few public buildings. Similarly, a

place meeting the conditions for economic growth will not necessarily be slowed by calamity: indeed it might well provide an economic incentive and an opportunity to upgrade productive capital.

### **3 CONCLUSION: RECONCILING PERSPECTIVES**

The possibility of reconciling perspectives has already been touched on with the example of drought relief in India and flood relief in Bangladesh and the potential mismatch between 'foreign' and 'local' perspectives and priorities. For 'development' it has long been a question as to whether and how international organizations can find a way better to reconcile these positions. The topic, particularly as regards development, is clearly large - it would include, for example, much of the discussion on participation - and well beyond the scope of this note. But there are possibilities for similar approaches in emergency relief, in the author's experience making action much more effective and efficient.

If an emergency is seen not only as physical outcomes, for example damage or deaths, but rather as the product of a particular set of social, geographical and economic circumstances, on which some damaging event has been superimposed; and if it is also accepted that the 'local' perspective on these events is both potentially legitimate and tends to reflect deeper local knowledge; then it can be argued that a more productive role can be defined for the outsider providing relief. In practice the interpretation of the 'local' view will tend necessarily to be incomplete and biased; in practice also it requires a close working association with the country and people concerned.

For example, recent events in Somalia can be seen and represented in sharply different ways. To the mass media - and one is tempted to say to some western Governments - the country was in a state of 'anarchy', controlled by demonized 'warlords', served by the unswerving loyalty of 'clans' and prepared

coldly to murder or inflict starvation on their fellows. Although there is an element of truth in this, the situation could also be represented as one arising from the unusual history of the country, that it had never properly amounted to a nation state in the generally accepted use of the term at any time, and that conditions, vile as they were in many localized areas, were far from anarchic. Indeed, one could argue that, within Somali society, there was a constant and surprisingly effective tendency to reorganize at local level (often with foreign support) to provide services. For example, the formation of a Ministry of Health - in fact, two, for north and south Mogadishu - which had begun contacts even during the war. Furthermore, one could argue that starvation was localized and, to a large extent, a consequence of an unusual, geographically based economy, and of a dependence on trade which was disrupted by the war. In this construction, the 'warlords', odious as they appear to westerners and many westernized Somalis, are what pass in the circumstances for legitimate 'politicians'.

The Somali case illustrates the argument that the perspective dictates the approach taken to relief and development. One, dominant, view was that order must be brought by force; a second was that the role of the outsider, as far as possible, was to minimize the effects of the civil war on the population, while allowing the continued evolution of the local political process, extreme as this was in Somalia. The practical types of actions in the two cases vary only in detail - in the setting of Somalia food and health programmes, for example, the difference lies in the choice of the particular activities chosen and the relationship of the outsider to them. To take a summary example is it more effective and efficient in the short and long run to supply a complete surgical hospital and its staff and equipment from outside; or to support the organized efforts of Somali surgeons in the existing hospital? Could it be that food could have been more effectively and easily distributed using existing market and trading systems than by enormously costly armed convoys?