

Whose Aid is it Anyway?

Politicizing aid in conflicts and crises

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A US Army soldier hands a meal to a girl in Samarra, Iraq, March 31, 2009. Photo courtesy of US Army. Use of US military imagery does not imply or constitute endorsement.

The effectiveness of international aid, both in meeting urgent needs and in tackling entrenched poverty, is being undermined in some of the world's poorest places. While effective aid has helped save lives, protect rights and build livelihoods, some donors' military and security interests have skewed global aid spending; and amidst conflict, disasters and political instability have too often led to uncoordinated, unsustainable, expensive and even dangerous aid projects. Skewed aid policies and practices threaten to undermine a decade of government donors' international commitments to effective, needs-focused international aid. This paper sets out how these commitments are being disregarded, and how this trend can be reversed.

Summary

Effective aid helps save lives, protect rights and build livelihoods. Yet in conflicts and politically unstable settings from Afghanistan to Yemen, lifesaving humanitarian assistance and longer-term efforts to reduce poverty are being damaged where aid is used primarily to pursue donors' own narrow political and security objectives. This is not only undermining humanitarian principles and donors' development commitments; it impacts on the lives of some of the most vulnerable people affected by conflicts and natural disasters.

- Some donors are increasingly concentrating both humanitarian and development aid on countries and regions seen to threaten their own immediate security interests, while neglecting other equally insecure, impoverished and conflict-afflicted places. Since 2002 one-third of all development aid to the 48 states labelled 'fragile' by the OECD has gone to just three countries: Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹ During this period aid to Iraq and Afghanistan alone has accounted for over two-fifths of the entire \$178bn global increase in aid provided by wealthy countries.
- From Afghanistan to Kenya, poorly conceived aid projects aimed at winning 'hearts and minds' have proved ineffective, costly, and have sometimes turned beneficiary communities and aid workers into targets of attack. Such practices are growing: US aid funds allocated to front-line military commanders to win 'hearts and minds' in Iraq and Afghanistan are now almost as large as the worldwide Development Assistance budget of the US government's aid agency USAID.
- In Afghanistan, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Somalia and elsewhere, donors and military forces have made aid conditional on the political and military cooperation of communities and aid organizations; and have used aid to buy information or compliance with military forces.
- While military assets and logistics have played vital roles in emergencies and natural disasters, aid inappropriately delivered using military forces themselves has sometimes led to wasteful and costly aid, while overlooking the real contribution that military and police forces can make to vulnerable communities' security needs. For instance, the Spanish army's high-profile vaccination programme and water distribution following the Haiti earthquake cost over 18 times that of comparable civilian efforts, which the Spanish military partly duplicated.

These problems are not new, but the impact of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as more recent aid policy shifts, have increased the trend. Both in Europe and North America, aid policies and programmes skewed by donors' foreign policy and national security

interests are beginning to be formally embedded in international development strategies and humanitarian practices. Foreign policy biases have since 2001 been written formally into aid policies and funding decisions in the USA, Canada and France. Elsewhere, including in the UK, Australia and the European Union, such priorities are at risk of being formally embedded in new international development strategies.

Policy coordination across foreign, defence and development departments can help better address common obstacles to development: for example, tackling climate change and capital flight; protecting civilians in conflict; preventing irresponsible arms transfers. But recruiting aid and aid institutions for donors' own national security objectives risks undermining the effectiveness of aid in meeting humanitarian needs and maximizing poverty reduction. Not only does this damage impartial attempts to provide aid and tackle poverty, but it often fails to build long-term security for recipient communities, their governments and donors themselves.

An agenda for effective aid

Drawing on the experiences of Oxfam's programmes and partners from Yemen and Afghanistan to Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this paper argues that security and stability are promoted – not undermined – by impartial, needs-based humanitarian aid, and by poverty-focussed development aid, owned by and responsive to its beneficiaries, and independent of donors' immediate military and security objectives.

Some donors and aid organisations *are* promoting such approaches. Aid allocation driven by transparent and impartial needs assessments, like the European Commission's humanitarian 'Global Needs Assessment' index, ensures that 'aid orphans' and forgotten crises, off the national security radar, are not neglected. In Afghanistan, the UK's 'stabilization' doctrine has since 2008 begun to abandon the use of short-term, high-profile aid interventions aimed at winning 'hearts and minds'. And in contrast to highly-visible schools and hospitals built by militarized aid units, health and education facilities funded by donor aid but owned and led by communities themselves are safely and cost-effectively expanding the provision of essential services amidst conflict: like the thousands of community-based schools established in more than a dozen Afghan provinces since 2001 using existing, low-profile community venues to start providing education rapidly, build community support and avoid armed opposition attacks.

With aid policies and practices at a crossroads, such approaches – putting good humanitarian and development practice at the heart of efforts to meet needs and build stability – need urgently to be amplified.

Recommendations

- To meet their existing commitments to development aid effectiveness and principled humanitarian action, donors should ensure that all aid – in conflicts, stable countries and within countries themselves – has as its principal purpose the reduction of either poverty or humanitarian needs.
- Donors should ensure that the development projects they fund or plan in conflicts and stable settings alike are responsive to the needs of communities, aligned where possible with the policies of local and national administrations, and sustainable after foreign development workers have left. Donors and aid agencies alike must ensure that aid does not contribute to violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.
- All armed forces should adhere to existing, internationally agreed civil-military guidelines, setting out the effective and appropriate roles of military and civilian actors responding to humanitarian needs in conflicts and disasters. Their doctrines and rules of engagement should prohibit the allocation or restriction of humanitarian assistance for military or counter-terrorism objectives.
- Aid organizations likewise need to ensure that their activities do not exacerbate or provide resources for conflict. They should implement standards and guidelines to ensure that humanitarian aid ‘does no harm’, and that development aid is sensitive to conflict. They should refuse any donor funding which is conditional on them cooperating with military forces or providing information to them, or which requires them to distribute aid or allocate development resources based on the political or military cooperation of recipients.

Notes

- 1 Oxfam GB calculations from OECD-DAC 'ODA 2a' dataset. The 48 countries are those listed in OECD, Ensuring Fragile States are not left behind: Summary Report (March 2009). The proportions of ODA they have received, according to the OECD-DAC's 'ODA 2a' dataset of ODA disbursements by all donors differ somewhat from the figures given in this 2009 OECD report. This may be because data in the OECD database has been updated since the 2009 report was written.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail advocacy@oxfaminternational.org.

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