

Nations Should Provide Aid for Humanitarian Reasons Alone

The Economist, "More Generous than Thou: The World's Response," January 8, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by The Economist Newspaper Ltd., www.economist.com. All rights reserved.

Although disaster aid should be a selfless response of all countries after a catastrophe, the 2004 Asian tsunami proved that aid could easily be used for political gain. Tony Blair, the British prime minister pledged to give more aid in order to seem more generous and to win votes from British constituents. Bickering between countries about who had given more and who was not giving enough soon erupted as well. The American government donated relief funds hoping that it would prove the country's generosity to Muslims and help to quell terrorism. It seemed that no governments were giving relief aid simply for the sake of helping victims. Worse, some of the promised aid may never materialize. Countries that experienced natural disasters in the last decade are still awaiting relief pledged to help them recover. Instead of focusing on disaster aid for political reasons, it would be more helpful if governments would donate funds to help poor countries develop the infrastructure and warning systems that would reduce casualties and the damage caused by natural disasters.

Disaster aid is generally thought to be different: everyone is for it. Development aid, by contrast, is often overtly political (it tends to go to friends) and always controversial (is it squandered? does it breed dependency?). Humanitarian aid given after, or during, wars is almost as contentious: it may be used by one side or the other to keep the fighting going or, by donors, to influence the outcome. But aid given after a natural disaster is pure, an affirmation of the best of the human spirit, uncontaminated by politics. That's what used to be said, anyway. It is the first piece of received wisdom to deserve examination after Asia's catastrophe.

Response for the Wrong Reasons

Not that individuals have failed to respond generously to the disaster [the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean], quite the opposite. They reached for their credit cards from the start, leaving governments scrambling to show themselves just as big-hearted. [British prime minister] Tony Blair promised on January 5th [2005] to outdo, with British taxpayers' money, whatever they might contribute voluntarily as individuals. Thus came the first politicisation of the tsunami aid: governments using it to win votes at home.

Then came the use of aid to score old points. Jan Egeland, the United Nations' emergency-relief co-ordinator, was accused of being churlish towards the Americans by calling western countries' first pledges stingy; and the French and some other Europeans, joined by some senior UN officials, were cross that the United States had at first set up a "regional core group" with Japan, India and Australia, but not with the European Union

or any European country. On January 6th [2005] Colin Powell, America's secretary of state, announced at a tsunami-relief summit in Jakarta that the group would be disbanded, and many of its assets would be put under UN direction.

By this time the aid issue was being used to peddle some pet schemes. Gordon Brown, Britain's finance minister, was arguing the case for a debt moratorium for the countries worst affected. Debt is a crippling burden for many countries, especially in Africa, but relieving it may not be the wisest way to help a government, like Indonesia's, that chooses to spend 3% of its GDP on defence but only 1.3% on education and 0.6% on health....

Some people, however, have much grander, even more political, aims for aid-giving. Mr Powell spelled out his in Indonesia before the summit: "We'd be doing it regardless of religion," he said of America's contribution. "But I think it does give the Muslim world ... an opportunity to see American generosity, American values in action.... And I hope that, as a result of our efforts, as a result of our helicopter pilots being seen by the citizens of Indonesia helping them, that value system of ours will be reinforced." American aid helped dry up the "pools of dissatisfaction" that led to terrorism, he said. But in Aceh, where Indonesian Islamist groups are giving relief, some Muslims have denounced America's help as cynically motivated.

Is the Response Enough?

Never mind the motives: is the aid doing any good? By this week, the main concerns were to prevent epidemics, especially those caused by dirty water, to find and tend the injured, to provide shelter and start clearing the debris. Children, who made up over a third of the tsunami's victims, according to the UN Children's Fund, are a key concern. With more money pledged in the week to January 3rd than the UN had received in the whole of 2004, cash is not the problem. Getting aid workers in place and providing the millions of displaced people with food, shelter, clean water and medical help are much harder.

Outsiders' relief operations fall into two categories. First, some foreign governments have sent members of their armed forces. The United States has dispatched more than 20 naval ships, including an aircraft carrier, the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, and a hospital ship, plus 1,300 marines. It has also sent six big transport aircraft and nine surveillance and rescue planes. Britain has sent two naval vessels; military help has also come from Australia, Germany and Pakistan. Japan is planning military aid.

Meanwhile, umpteen aid agencies have joined the cause. More than 50, said the UN, were this week opening field hospitals in Aceh alone, and countless more are working in other stricken places. Many were present in one of four regional centres: Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital; Banda Aceh, the provincial capital of Aceh; Meulaboh, not far to its south; and U-Tapao, a military base in Thailand.

But who was in charge? No one. At the summit in Jakarta, a powerful array of world leaders pledged to put their contributions through the UN; until then, only rough co-ordination efforts had been carried out by its agencies and the American-powered "regional core group".

Aid for Redevelopment

Prior to the meeting, Mr Egeland was still appealing for more help, especially for helicopters, fork-lift trucks, boats, planes, air-traffic-control units and lorries. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies says half a million people will need emergency help for another six months. Then, though, as reconstruction begins, the disaster relief will start turning into development aid. What can the victims, and their governments, expect?

Disappointment, if past form is repeated. Of the \$1.1 billion pledged to help the people of the Iranian city of Bam, destroyed by an earthquake in 2003, only \$17.5m was sent, according to the Iranian government. Mozambique likewise received less than half of the \$400m it was promised after the floods of 2000, said a minister. And Honduras and Nicaragua still await two-thirds of the \$8.7 billion proffered after Hurricane Mitch swept through in 1998. Other countries have similar tales to tell. The IMF [International Monetary Fund], World Bank and individual countries accused of breaking their word may have had good reasons for doing so: perhaps the intended recipients were in no position to make good use of further money. But, if so, donors should now be more careful about their pledges.

There are other fears: that "aid fatigue" will set in, leading donors to forget other needy recipients, such as AIDS and malaria sufferers, and the people of Africa. That would be tragic, and an insult to countries like India, whose prime minister was, despite the devastation in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere, going ahead with a long-scheduled AIDS meeting this week.

Many poor countries are already concerned that the lofty aims adopted by 191 countries in the UN Millennium Declaration may be in jeopardy. One prominent aim was for rich countries to strive to reach the long-standing objective of giving 0.7% of GDP to development aid. Several of the countries that have been loudest in their declarations of generosity in the past fortnight are laggards in the giving of development aid. Germany provides just 0.28% of GDP, Britain 0.34%, France 0.41%. The United States, though its citizens are individually generous, is at the bottom of the rich countries' table, giving 0.15% of GDP.

Learning from Experience

Hopes and fears, however, do not rest on cash alone. If good is to come of the disaster it will come of wider lessons learned. The lateness of the response, the lack of an early-warning system, the paucity of rapid-reaction units and the absence of an overall relief co-ordinator all demand solutions. At present the United States is the only power with a

worldwide reach but, even so, it took six days to get 40 helicopters to work in the disaster areas. The UN, for its part, has more experience than any other organisation in delivering emergency relief, but it is a sprawling group of agencies with no resources worth speaking of other than those of its member countries. Somehow power and experience must be married and, with the help of the EU, Japan and others, persuaded to set up a standing disaster-response unit that can act at short notice.

Lastly, more thought, and aid, must be given to reducing the cost and casualties caused by natural disasters. The numbers affected in such catastrophes have been rising dramatically in recent years and, according to a report by a charity, Tearfund, they are mostly in poor countries. Tearfund points to the effectiveness of such measures as planting trees to reduce the impact of floods and landslides, building techniques to help houses withstand earthquakes, cyclone shelters, sea dykes and so on. The United States Geological Survey reckons that the economic losses from natural disasters in the 1990s could have been reduced by \$280 billion by investing just one-seventh of that sum in such measures. But giving for such ends is not fashionable. Six months before Mozambique was inundated in 2000, its government appealed for \$2.7m to prepare for an emergency. It received less than half that. After the floods, but only after them, donors gave about \$200m.

As it happens, a UN conference on disaster-reduction has long been planned to take place in the Japanese city of Kobe from January 18th to 22nd. May it lead to action, as well as words.

Study guide for this article:

Explain why it would be better for societies to spend money on disaster preparation and prevention rather than recovery.

Why do governments resist spending money on disaster preparation and prevention?

Give examples of how conflicting goals among different societies can hinder disaster relief.