



The McLeod Group



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CANADA'S HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

When disasters happen – floods, fires, famines or wars – Canadians want to help. But to be useful, our response must be guided by a basic understanding of the challenges of humanitarian aid. This paper lays out some of the principles of humanitarian assistance, and provides recommendations to the Canadian government and other actors.

What is humanitarian aid?

Humanitarian aid is the most visible form of foreign aid, provided in response to natural disasters and emergencies related to conflict. It is designed to meet the immediate needs of the people affected by these events. While it is counted as part of Canada's development assistance, it does not fit well in that category because it is not intended to help reduce poverty or improve the quality of life over the long term.

Humanitarian aid is provided by countries on a bilateral basis and by UN specialized agencies such as the World Food Programme, the High Commissioner for Refugees and UNICEF. It is also provided by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, civil society organizations (NGOs such as CARE, World Vision, Oxfam and Médecins Sans Frontières), and by many small organizations in the countries where the disaster occurs. In 2014 over US\$24 billion was provided through these channels to support humanitarian assistance.¹

Humanitarian emergencies take many forms. Spectacular natural disasters such as hurricanes, typhoons, floods, earthquakes and tsunamis attract the most attention. Conflict-related emergencies can have the same impact as natural disasters, in the form of loss of life, home and livelihood, but unlike most natural disasters they are characterized by their long duration, in some cases over decades, and their complex causes. In all humanitarian emergencies, the poorest people are the most vulnerable, and women are often affected more than men.

Humanitarian Principles

Humanitarian aid is based on four principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. The fundamental moral principle of humanity, that human suffering should be prevented or alleviated wherever it is found, shapes the actions of all humanitarian actors. Impartiality and neutrality mean that humanitarian aid must be provided to all those in need without discrimination, and that response should be proportional to need and not influenced by how the disaster tugs at heartstrings or is linked to political interests. Independence means that humanitarian action is autonomous from any political, economic, military or other extraneous objective.

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNOCHA on Message: *Humanitarian Principles*, June 2012, available at https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf.

The McLeod Group works to strengthen Canada's contribution to a better world.

The McLeod Group is made up of professionals with many years of experience in government, civil society and academia, working across the fields of international development, diplomacy and foreign policy. We work with others who value human rights, inclusion, equality and sustainable development to advance Canadian policy and action on international cooperation and foreign affairs.

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The number of people affected by disasters has risen dramatically in recent years. In 2014 the number of people forced from their homes by violence and persecution rose to 58 million.² The major impacts were felt in Central African Republic, the Philippines, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen and across the Sahelian region. Globally in 2014, UN-coordinated appeals for assistance targeted 88 million persons.³

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief have developed a Code of Conduct to guide emergency responses.⁴ Humanitarian assistance also falls under international humanitarian law, codified in the Geneva Conventions of 1949. These conventions apply particularly to conflict and the protection of civilians and refugees.

In 2003 the major donors agreed to the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative, which sought to establish a framework of principles to guide good behaviour and support effectiveness. This framework consists of 23 principles, and encourages greater donor accountability.⁵

Trends and Issues

Humanitarian expenditure by the developed-country donors, directly and through implementing partners, is tracked by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking System and by the OECD Creditor Reporting System. Flows from individuals, non-traditional donors, and from private sources are, however, hard to track.

Funding for humanitarian assistance is very unevenly distributed, influenced by political factors, donor priorities and public (media) profile. At the start of 2015, OCHA projected humanitarian need for the year at US\$16.4 billion. By the end of the year the projected need had risen to US \$19.9 billion, but only 52% of this was actually provided.⁶ Most donor-provided humanitarian funding is committed on a year-to-year basis, despite the multi-year nature of protracted crises, many of which are conflict-related. The global

humanitarian appeal for 2016 was set at \$20.1 billion, to assist 87.6 million people.

Often, donors use humanitarian assistance as a substitute for meaningful political and diplomatic action to address the causes of the conflict. The ongoing Darfur emergency is a clear example of this tendency.

Donor countries often use their humanitarian assistance to advertise their own generosity, in the form of very visible military personnel and vehicles to deliver the aid, or ostentatious labelling of humanitarian supplies. These actions can risk the independence of a humanitarian response. In conflict-related disasters, where non-official combatants (rebels, bandits, unofficial militias) are active, often using the civilian population as shields or pawns, compromising the independence of humanitarian assistance can have fatal consequences for aid workers.

Well-meaning groups, celebrities, and inexperienced civil society organizations often become involved in high-profile natural disasters. Despite their best intentions, many are not equipped to help and only get in the way of experienced agencies, while raising expectations of their supporters. To be effective, humanitarian aid requires well-trained staff backed by knowledgeable agencies able to provide sustained support.

Gender Bias

Many agencies have ignored gender inequality and youth in their response. The improper placement of latrines, for example, can increase the vulnerability of women and girls, as can the failure to provide water and firewood, or the distribution of food to men who sell it for beer and bullets. While humanitarian agencies have taken measures to address these issues in recent years, gender bias in humanitarian aid needs constant attention.

Recent Humanitarian Crises

The recent upsurge in humanitarian disasters is largely the result of three events: the Ebola epidemic in the West African countries of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia; the protracted crisis in the Middle East, stemming from the civil war in Syria, and the Nepal earthquakes. The Ebola epidemic demonstrated how poor countries' weak health systems make them vulnerable to easily transmittable diseases, with both immediate and long-term consequences. The complex, conflict-caused emergency in Syria, which has displaced almost half that country's population, shows how disasters that result in large refugee populations can have serious consequences for neighbouring countries. In both emergencies, the world's response was slow and insufficient. Timeliness in the provision of humanitarian aid is crucial in meeting needs, containing the human and physical damage, and enabling reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts to begin.

Ebola, Syria and Nepal dominated the media in 2015, but there were many other disasters of lesser scale but no less acute in terms of need. There were major floods in the Balkans, refugees from Boko Haram in Nigeria, Typhoon Hagupit in the Philippines, intensified conflict in Yemen, protracted drought and conflict-related crisis in South Sudan and Darfur, and the consequences of past disasters, such as ongoing reconstruction efforts in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. The economic cost of weather-related natural disasters in less-developed countries in 2014 was US \$58 billion.⁷

As the result of climate change, international humanitarian assistance providers are increasingly dealing with the linked issues of vulnerability and resilience. Risk reduction and building resilience can take many forms, such as early warning of natural disasters, building local capacity to move vulnerable populations out of harm's way, identifying and reducing hazards, protecting livelihoods, and transforming hospitals, clinics and schools into disaster-resistant shelters.

What Should Canada Do?

Canada has been contributing significant financial resources for humanitarian assistance in recent years, and has been a champion of the international Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative. Canada was sixth among donors in 2015, providing 3.2% of the reported total global humanitarian flows.⁸ In 2014-2015, Canada co-chaired the GHD steering group.

However, Canada lacks an overall humanitarian assistance strategy and thereby risks compromising its commitment to impartiality and neutrality. While Global Affairs Canada, formerly the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (incorporating CIDA), has the lead role for policy and operations, other agencies of the federal government may become involved in complex emergencies. This was seen in the reaction to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, when the then DFAIT and CIDA were joined by the Department of National Defence/Canadian Forces, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Department of Public Safety and the RCMP.

In its 2012 review of Canadian aid, the OECD said that Canada needed a clear humanitarian strategy, strengthened tools for addressing disaster vulnerability and supporting post-crisis recovery, and better mechanisms for timely disbursement of funds.⁹ The Canadian government persists in using what is called the matching fund approach. Depending on the dimensions of the crisis and the public/media profile of the event, the government announces – usually several weeks after the emergency – that it will increase its financial contribution to match amounts donated to responding NGOs. Confusion arises as many individuals believe their contribution to a particular organization will be matched to the same agency. In fact the commitment applies only to the government's own funding.

Canada needs a **national humanitarian assistance strategy** to provide a framework that would coordinate the work of various government agencies, civil society organizations (NGOs) and even the private sector. This strategy should be developed through a consultative process with all stakeholders.

This strategy should:

- Recognize that **different stakeholders have different capabilities** in delivering humanitarian assistance. It should work to ensure their optimal contribution. NGOs are often already present, working on development projects with local partners in the affected countries, meaning that they have networks which can be adapted to deliver emergency aid. The military have important assets such as aircraft and vehicles which can help deliver supplies and shelter. However, military personnel are not trained in humanitarian aid and may encounter problems in adhering to the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Multilateral agencies (such as the World Food Programme and UNHCR) and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement have extensive delivery capacity, and for prolonged, complex emergencies will likely be present for extended periods.
- Recognize the **specific needs of women** in humanitarian crises, in their roles as heads of households, as particularly vulnerable displaced persons and, in conflict-related emergencies, as targets of gender-based violence.
- Acknowledge the growing risk from extreme weather events and provide for more investment in resilience, through **disaster risk reduction** measures. The poor are the most vulnerable to disasters; their vulnerability can be reduced by improving the local capacity to move people away from areas likely to be struck by violent storms, tsunamis and floods. Risk reduction can include

ensuring that essential public infrastructure, such as hospitals, clinics and schools, are able to function as disaster-resistant shelters. Canada should adopt the motto “Reduce vulnerability and secure livelihoods” and reserve at least 5% of its annual humanitarian budget for preparedness and disaster risk reduction activities, in line with recent OECD recommendations.¹⁰

- **Allocate funds on a multi-year basis** to help leading NGOs build their humanitarian response capacity. Disaster derails development, often destroying years of investment. Development NGOs have a direct stake in immediately responding to the needs of people with whom they may have been working for years. However, an effective humanitarian response needs dedicated and trained personnel, and NGOs working on very slim financial margins frequently do not have the capacity to respond rapidly.
- Publish an **annual report on the national humanitarian response** efforts, including the work of civil society organizations and others so that Canadians can understand the complete spectrum of action taken on their behalf. This report could also highlight the evolving nature of humanitarian assistance and the challenges faced by government and other agencies delivering assistance.

Canadians pride themselves on their compassion, and want to contribute to a rapid and effective response to the worst humanitarian disasters. However, to be effective, Canada needs to develop a more coherent and strategic system for responding in times of need.

NOTES

¹ Development Initiatives, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015, p. 19, <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/GHA-Report-2015-Interactive-Online.pdf>.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, "Code of Conduct", <http://www.ifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/code-of-conduct/>.

⁵ Good Humanitarian Donorship, "23 Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship", 2013, <http://www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/principles-good-practice-of-ghd/principles-good-practice-ghd.html>.

⁶ Development Initiatives, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2014, p. 13, <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/report/gha-report-2014>.

⁷ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *World Disasters Report 2014 – Data*, Table 4, <http://www.ifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/world-disasters-report/world-disasters-report-2014/world-disasters-report-2014-data/>.

⁸ OCHA, "Strategic Response Plan(s): 2015 – Summary of funding and outstanding pledges by donor as of 06-March-2016", https://fts.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha_6_2015.PDF.

⁹ OECD, "Canada: Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Peer Review 2012", <http://www.oecd.org/dac/peer-reviews/canadapeerreview2012.pdf>.

¹⁰ OECD, "Recommendations of the Council on the Governance of Critical Risks", May 6, 2014, <http://www.oecd.org/gov/risk/Critical-Risks-Recommendation.pdf>.