

Good Humanitarian Donorship: a mouse or a lion?

*Government donors increasingly have significant influence over the shape of global responses to humanitarian crises. Developing effective ways of holding donor governments to account for their roles and responsibilities in humanitarian action has long been a challenging pursuit. Here, **Joanna Macrae** and **Adele Harmer** report on a new – and unprecedented – initiative*

Donor governments have been strong supporters of the various initiatives aimed at strengthening accountability and improving performance within the international humanitarian system. The majority have, however, concentrated on establishing standards and codes of conduct for operational aid agencies. Less attention has been paid to how donors are held to account for their policies, and the implications of their decision-making. Recent research by the Humanitarian Policy Group has found that mechanisms and lesson-learning in accountability are weak at national and international levels. The research identifies the need to focus on strategic and political accountability, against clearly defined objectives and definitions of humanitarian assistance, in order to strengthen the checks and balances that govern donor behaviour.

The problems in donor accountability partly stem from the fact that the people suffering at the centre of a humanitarian crisis have no voice or access to the formal accountability mechanisms of donor governments. The links between donors and beneficiaries are particularly tenuous and indirect. The problem is also particular to the environment that aid departments operate in within their national governments. Humanitarian assistance is rarely just the concern of a single aid department; other, often more powerful, ministries are involved, and humanitarian aid programmes are at times, linked with a government's broader objectives and policies. This can lead to disagreement among donors and humanitarian actors as to what humanitarian aid is for, and how performance can be measured.

Underpinning these obstacles is the peculiar nature of humanitarian assistance. Unlike development assistance, the official donor contributions on which humanitarian aid relies are voluntary. This has undoubtedly influenced the incentives to evaluate and measure donor performance. As a comparison, donors have made significant progress, through the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD and other fora, in harmonising and standardising practice in development cooperation.

Research on accountable donorship

A recent HPG report entitled *Uncertain Power: The Changing Role of Official Donors in Humanitarian Action* examines the changing role of official donors in humanitarian action, in particular the key obstacles to donor accountability. The report identifies weaknesses in all areas of official donors' accountability for humanitarian policies and action, and provides recommendations as to how checks and balances governing donor behaviour might be strengthened. The report suggests focusing on improved strategic and political accountability, against clearly-defined strategic objectives and definitions of humanitarian assistance, followed through at the managerial and contractual levels.

Overall, the report identifies three overarching principles that might be used to inform official humanitarian donorship:

- a commitment to international law and humanitarian principles, including defining the distinctive purpose of official humanitarian assistance;
- a commitment to needs-based programming, including linking resources with need; and
- predictable, adequate and flexible funding.

To operationalise these principles and establish a framework through which donor performance could be measured, further steps were identified, including:

- a commitment in domestic law to the impartial allocation of official humanitarian aid;

- enhancing the capacity and engagement of parliamentary committees and audit offices in reviewing humanitarian aid programmes;
- strengthening the role of the DAC in developing and monitoring humanitarian assistance issues; and
- ensuring regular, independent evaluations of donor programmes and system-wide evaluations.

The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative

The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative was launched at an international meeting on 15 and 16 June 2003 in Stockholm. Representatives of donor governments, UN agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and other organisations involved in humanitarian action gathered to reflect on donor behaviour, analyse challenges in the humanitarian system and lay the foundations for good humanitarian donorship.

The objectives of the meeting were three-fold:

- 1) To identify and agree the objectives and definition of humanitarian action
- 2) To identify and agree a set of Principles and Good Practice as a common platform of understanding for good humanitarian donorship.
- 3) To agree means for implementation and follow-up to put these into practice.

The launch of the initiative was an unprecedented event; never before have donor governments come together to agree objectives and a definition of humanitarian action, and general principles and good practice in the financing, management and accountability of humanitarian response. The meeting was organised around three thematic sessions:

- Meeting global basic humanitarian needs – the challenge to the international donor community
- Promoting coherent and effective donor response – basic principles and approaches

- Identifying steps towards more effective and accountable donor behaviour

There was lively debate both during the formal sessions and in the meeting margins. Speakers included the UN's Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, the UN Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator for Sudan; the Director of ECHO, the Assistant Secretary of State in the US Department of State, and the Director-General of the ICRC. The conference was attended by representatives of the 20 largest donors in the humanitarian sector, as well as representatives from UN humanitarian and development agencies, leading academics and researchers in the humanitarian field, the chairs of NGO steering groups and the head policy coordinator in the OECD-DAC.

Objectives and definition of humanitarian action

The final text endorsed in Stockholm was watered down a little from its original form, though the negotiations around it could be seen as an expression of donors' seriousness about what they were committing to. The objectives and definition of humanitarian action were as follows:

- The objectives of humanitarian action are to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations.
- Humanitarian action should be guided by the humanitarian principles of *humanity*, meaning the centrality of saving human lives and alleviating suffering wherever it is found; *impartiality*, meaning the implementation of actions solely on the basis of need, without discrimination between or within affected populations; *neutrality*, meaning that humanitarian action must not favour any side in an armed conflict or other dispute where such action is carried out; and *independence*, meaning the autonomy of humanitarian objectives from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

- Humanitarian action includes the protection of civilians and those no longer taking part in hostilities, and the provision of food, water and sanitation, shelter, health services and other items of assistance, undertaken for the benefit of affected people and to facilitate the return to normal lives and livelihoods.

General principles

In negotiation over general principles, there was concern that donors could not reasonably commit to the ambitious target of ‘meeting the entirety of global humanitarian needs’, and this part of the text was removed.

The general principles of humanitarian action that were agreed included:

- Respect and promote the implementation of international humanitarian law, refugee law and human rights.
- Allocate humanitarian funding in proportion to needs and on the basis of needs assessments.
- Request implementing humanitarian organisations to ensure, to the greatest possible extent, adequate involvement of beneficiaries in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian response.

Good practice in donor financing, management and accountability

Here, there were difficulties in the text around the notion of burden-sharing – one donor emphasised the need to see this in relation to the totality of humanitarian needs, not in relation to any particular situation. Many participants agreed that, in particular, the identified practices in learning and accountability were narrow in scope and weak in relation to specific practice.

Key points endorsed included:

- An agreement to strive to ensure that the funding of humanitarian action in new crises does not adversely affect ongoing crises.

- An agreement to encourage regular evaluations of international responses to humanitarian crises, including assessments of donor performance.
- A commitment to ensure a high degree of accuracy, timeliness and transparency in donor reporting on official humanitarian assistance spending, and to encourage the development of standardised formats for such reporting.
- While stressing the importance of transparent and strategic priority-setting and financial planning by implementing organisations, explore the possibility of reducing, or enhancing the flexibility of, earmarking, and of introducing longer-term funding arrangements.

Where now?

The significance of what was achieved at Stockholm should not be underestimated. The months of preparatory work by donor governments and key organisations to develop the agenda, and to draft, negotiate and find consensus on the proposed text, was ultimately rewarded. Despite this, the real work towards good donorship is yet to be done. A number of participants posed the ‘so what?’ question, not to dismiss the agenda, but to challenge donors to articulate what would be different after the meeting.

An Implementation Plan, endorsed by all participants in Stockholm, sets out five initial activities. The plan will be implemented with the management and oversight of a group of donor representatives in Geneva, co-chaired by the Swedish and Canadian governments. Through this plan, donor governments’ commitment to the principles of humanitarianism will be tested; it also provides an opportunity for interested stakeholders to promote and pursue the good donorship agenda to ensure that the distinctive principles of humanitarianism become established norms in donor behaviour. The five activities are as follows:

- No later than 2004/05, interested donors will identify, in consultation with humanitarian organisations, at least one crisis subject to a Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal, to which the Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship will be applied in a concerted and coordinated manner.

- Donors will invite the OECD-DAC to consider ways to strengthen the coverage of humanitarian action in existing and/or complementary peer reviews.
- Donors undertake to jointly explore the possibility of harmonising reporting requirements and the management demands placed upon implementing organisations.
- Donors will aim, in consultation with the UN and the OECD-DAC, to agree a comprehensive common definition of official humanitarian assistance for reporting and statistical purposes, including clarity of definitions between multilateral and bilateral humanitarian assistance.
- Participating donors will seek to promote the wider use among all official donors of the Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship, and invite all interested donors to participate in the follow-up of this plan.

Reflections on good humanitarian donorship

A number of participants at the Stockholm meeting expressed concern that the conclusions did not go far enough – that they made the timid squeak of a mouse, rather than the roar of a lion. Others noted that one of the most important goals, not included in the Stockholm conclusions, was a commitment to the impartial allocation of official humanitarian aid in domestic law.

At the same time, many saw the Stockholm meeting as an historic marker, perhaps one of the most positive developments for the humanitarian donor community in recent years. The meeting established the distinctiveness of the humanitarian agenda, as a subset of aid policy. It established a set of shared, commonly agreed objectives for, and a definition of, humanitarian action, as well as a set of general principles and good practice for good donorship, including a principle to respect and promote international humanitarian law, refugee law and human rights; a commitment to allocate funding in proportion to needs; and a commitment to strive to ensure predictable and flexible funding.

The challenge now is to make respect for the distinctive principles of humanitarianism and elements of good practice norms in donor behaviour. Meaningful shifts in donor

behaviour tend to come about from a combination of internal commitment and resources for institutional change, and external pressure – from non-governmental organisations and from other donors. In taking the initiative forward, donors recognise that they need to become better humanitarian advocates within their own aid departments, within the wider government, and with their public constituents. Humanitarian organisations, both individually and collectively, need to maintain a critical dialogue on the good donorship initiative, as advocates, monitors and scrutinisers of donor progress and performance, so that the momentum of the meeting is not lost, and the initiative remains firmly at the heart of the international humanitarian agenda.

References and further reading

For official documentation from the Good Donorship meeting, see the Swedish Foreign ministry website: <http://www.utrikes.regeringen.se/inenglish>.

For a detailed account of donors and accountability, see:

Sarah Collinson and Margie Buchanan-Smith, *International Humanitarian Action and the Accountability of Official Donors*, HPG Briefing Paper 6 (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2002). Available at www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/hpgbrief6.pdf.

Joanna Macrae et al., *Uncertain Power: The Changing Role of Official Donors in Humanitarian Action*, HPG Report 12 (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2002). Available at www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/hpgreport12.pdf.

Larry Minear and Ian Smillie, *The Quality of Money: Donor Behaviour in Humanitarian Financing* (Boston, MA: Tufts University, 2003).