

Cause for hope? DFID's response to the Humanitarian Emergency Response Review

The British government's humanitarian aid policy seems set for some significant changes in the wake of its response to the Humanitarian Emergency Response Review (HERR), delivered on 15 June. The HERR insisted that humanitarian response be placed in the broader aid context: the vastly bigger 'development' aid budget and humanitarian response should be seen and used as a coherent whole, with 'development' given the key responsibility for helping to prevent disasters and making states, communities and households better able to withstand and bounce back from crises. The current global humanitarian system was described as not 'fit for purpose', and requiring radical overhaul. To bring about real change, the HERR argued for a new and wider set of relationships with governments, communities and people affected by crises, more robust ways to measure impact and greater accountability to the real world – demonstrating the changes we make and the way in which we try to make them. Taken as a whole, the HERR called for what amounted to a paradigm shift in the way we conceive of and deliver humanitarian aid.

There was much to applaud in this 'radical common sense' critique, though of course there were limitations. The HERR looked solely at natural disasters, and did not examine conflict and crises in fragile states and complex political situations, even though these are the most important – and most difficult – parts of humanitarian response. There was little on humanitarian space or humanitarian principles. And there was the worry that a document calling for such far-reaching change would be used merely as a checklist of recommendations, ducking the bigger challenge of reorganising

ourselves – donors, the UN system, NGOs – and the ways in which all of these parts of the system relate to each other.

The UK government's response to the HERR opens with the big picture, and says many things which are welcome. The very first paragraph relates to the direction, principles and approach outlined in the HERR and commits to taking this as a guide not only for humanitarian work but also for development aid. A particularly welcome point is the fact that, even though the HERR did not have a mandate to look at conflict and fragile states, DFID explicitly recognises that the HERR's recommendations are also relevant to these cases. DFID also sets out a very clear statement about humanitarian principles, including international humanitarian law – aid will be delivered on the basis of need alone, not according to political or strategic objectives. These statements are extremely important, but it would be wrong to think that they can be applied without difficulty.

DFID has essentially accepted all the main principles contained in the HERR. Disasters will be anticipated and should be avoided through early response. Resilience will be a core component of all (development) work everywhere, with a specific resilience programme developed initially in five countries. DFID will play a leadership role in promoting better multilateral response, working with others to improve UN humanitarian leadership. Accountability and impact assessment will be central. All of this is encouraging.

The picture emerging from a more detailed look is less clear. The importance of the HERR was always in its implicit rather than explicit

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recommendations, and lay in the fundamental (unstated) changes that would be needed to bring them about. It is perhaps unfair to expect that these would all be addressed at this stage in the government's response, but there are signs that we need to keep watch and stay engaged. There is perhaps an inevitable shift of emphasis to the technological. For example, anticipation is taken to mean more scientific early warning, global registers of risk and so on. People involved on the ground know that it is rare for early warning systems to fail to provide any warning of impending catastrophe: crises happen because warnings are not acted on in time. It is much harder to address the causes of this problem than it is to install a new technological fix.

Is DFID really ready to take on all the implications of working with others 'to find new ways of acting quickly in "slow onset" disasters to stop them becoming major emergencies'? Some of the ingredients are here – an openness to using new types of response, linking development and humanitarian aid and, of course, resilience-building. But we all know that slow-onset crises will continue to cause disasters for a long time to come, whatever 'resilience-building' we undertake. DFID is proposing to set up a new rapid response fund, which is welcome for sudden-onset disasters, but these are in fact quite rare. Heading off the more common slow-onset crises requires something quite different – a long-term presence on the ground, backed by longer-term and flexible funding for interventions that can switch from one mode to another as conditions change, and strategic action based on a collaborative way of working. The words 'flexible' and 'collaborative' are not part of DFID's response. The HERR identified the need for longer-term funding to those agencies, including NGOs, that are the main actors in operational response. This was one of few recommendations to be rejected by the policy-makers in DFID, who instead propose 'new mechanisms' to ensure more timely and higher-quality response. Until we know what shape these new mechanisms will take it is impossible to know whether this is a step forward.

The word 'competition' does appear, and this causes enthusiasm and anxiety in equal measure. Competition is supposed to ensure that resources go to those actors that can achieve the best possible impact. But how to know? Humanitarian actors are reluctant to openly acknowledge just how difficult good humanitarian response can be. We often present it to the public as 'getting the job done', but the really hard part is to know what job to do and how. For a donor to assess rival bids competitively, it has to make judgements about which proposal best fits the needs of the people concerned, taking into consideration a range of complex economic, political

and social factors. Making this assessment also requires robust measurement of past impact. Since this does not yet exist, on what basis will agencies (NGOs and private sector companies) compete? If they are competing solely on price and 'outputs', then this would be worrying. Again and again we have learned the lesson that impact suffers when we fail to invest in quality – in the time to analyse what we are doing, and in experienced staff to manage complex operations. The value of this investment only shows up if we are able to assess impact well, and, as is well recognised, the current state of humanitarian impact assessment leaves much to be desired.

There is a danger that a focus on competition will lead to less collaboration and to interventions that provide signs of activity, without delivering the most tangible and appropriate results. That said, a focus on competition may encourage efforts to build up an evidence base with which to measure impact. This in turn could commit DFID to working with agencies to ensure that they can show that what they are delivering will bring impact, to demonstrate that they can deliver on time and in an appropriate way. This will require considerable investment. DFID has announced a new fund to be used for building agencies' capacity to respond better to humanitarian crises. This is very welcome. Hopefully, the new fund will be accompanied by a significant investment in developing impact assessment. Working with agencies to develop response proposals that meet all these criteria also implies a large increase in DFID's investment in its own staff. Will this be forthcoming? One would not necessarily expect a policy response at this level to answer such questions in detail, so we must wait and see.

The importance of DFID's aid goes beyond how it spends its own money. DFID often helps set the agenda on humanitarian response, and if DFID has committed to develop thinking on the crucial issues highlighted in the HERR this is a significant opportunity for much wider, global engagement in these areas. DFID has plenty of early opportunities to demonstrate what timely response on the basis of need looks like. Can it show the citizens of South Kordofan in Sudan that their suffering is as important as that of the citizens of Libya, even if their political importance to the UK is less obvious? Can it show that the current slow-onset drought in the arid areas of Ethiopia and Kenya can be given resources to prevent catastrophe before children start to starve – or, even better, to show that floods predicted for later in the year can be prepared for and responded to before they happen? Achieving this is a challenge that has eluded the humanitarian community so far, and it is a challenge far harder than making an encouraging policy speech. The beginning has given us cause for hope. The devil, as always, will be in the detail.