

## GOOD HUMANITARIAN DONORSHIP - SOME THOUGHTS ON THE WAY FORWARD

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The GHD initiative is extremely important – perhaps one of the most important initiatives in humanitarian action in a decade. And it is important, not least, because it came from donors themselves. It answers the criticism of twenty years in five pages of resolution, and it is a credit to all of the donors involved, but especially the Netherlands, Sweden and Canada which have had the stamina and the courage to push the initiative forward and to give it life. It has the potential to make major differences in your ability to reach more people in need, more quickly, more effectively and more equitably.

The book that Larry Minear and I recently completed, *The Charity of Nations: Humanitarian Action in a Calculating World* describes humanitarian action as it was before the GHD was initiated. It describes a humanitarian world in which:

- Humanitarianism is not the main driver of donor behaviour;
- The collective policy framework is inconsistent and contradictory;
- Mistrust and a lack of transparency are as much the rule as the exception.

It is a world in which the collective humanitarian endeavour is considerably less than the sum of the parts. I would like to quote from a paragraph I wrote for an earlier Humanitarianism & War publication, *Relief & Development; The Struggle for Synergy*:

Imagine an assembly line in an automobile factory. Imagine people along the conveyer belt making carburetors – perhaps excellent carburetors – without knowing much about the engine to which they will be attached. Imagine hundreds of engines backed up, waiting for automobile bodies that might or might not be produced, depending on levels of interest in the sheet metal department. Imagine the body shop producing only right-side fenders and no doors because the design for the left-side fenders and doors has not been completed or somebody else was supposed to make them and did not. Imagine that budgeting for the end product has been organized around the individual components, that wax paper has been supplied for windows because there was not enough money for glass. Imagine a factory producing vehicles for a market, road conditions, and drivers that it barely understands.

The upshot of our system is not badly made cars. It is a badly made emergency response system, with funding for Zambia but not Zimbabwe; funding for water but not vaccinations – or vaccinations and not water; funding for food, but not seeds; support for children, not adults; for women, not men. Support for *things*, but not for protection; relief too late; buses taking people home too soon. And rarely enough of anything. The worst upshot of this system is “forgotten emergencies”, an anodyne expression masking the horrors of death and starvation in dozens of small and large emergencies in every corner of the world over the past 30 years.

So the GHD is *hugely* important, because in its proposed principles and elements of good practice, it aims to do away with the worst of these problems.

And the start has been good. Donors have obviously taken the initiative seriously – at their headquarters, in the DAC, in their field operations, and in their work with UN agencies.

As Brendan Rogers (Ireland) and several others have said, however, there is still a long way to go.

I would like to offer some thoughts about possible ways forward in five areas: mainstreaming, funding models, transition, the security-humanitarian interface and accountability.

### **Mainstreaming**

It is not clear that everyone understands “mainstreaming” in the same way. Norway said mainstreaming is important because we need to get the GHD into our ministries and parliaments where political decisions are made, so that it has a life beyond the people who attend these meetings.

We would argue that while individual humanitarian departments need to mainstream the GHD in their own agencies and governments, there is such a long way to go to make the real difference that the GHD aims for, that we cannot possibly consider any mainstreaming that relegates it to the back burner. Debates about mainstreaming marked the women’s movement and gender programming for years. The same was true of human rights. But in many of the agencies where these issues were, in fact, “mainstreamed”, they simply disappeared.

If we want the GHD to be genuinely mainstreamed, it needs a much wider constituency, both at home and in the world of humanitarian action. NGOs, which are on the front line of humanitarian action, which raise significant funds from citizens over and above what they contribute in their taxes, and which manage more than half of all humanitarian delivery, are largely unaware of the GHD. Many think it is about the CAP, and many are either ambivalent or suspicious of it. We heard about the need to involve non traditional donors, and countries that contribute to humanitarian action by hosting and bearing huge costs associated with refugees from neighbouring emergencies: Pakistan, Guinea, Tanzania.

If we want more money for the humanitarian enterprise – and more money is desperately needed – we have to find ways to take the message to politicians and to the public so they understand that *our* future is not immune from the disease and dislocation and war that marks so much of today’s world, and that band-aid solutions are not enough.

People have said at this meeting that we have to be “realistic”, “pragmatic”, that there are “national priorities” and laws, as though these are things that cannot be changed. If these

priorities and laws are detrimental to good humanitarian donorship, they *should* be changed, and they can be – if we make the case well, and if we persist. Margaret Mead once said, “Never underestimate the power of people who wish to change the future.”

## **Funding Models**

Earmarking is the most difficult issue facing the GHD. Several have spoken about it at this meeting, not so much in its defence, but saying that it is inevitable, or that it is not really as bad as some have made out.

Let us be clear: earmarking, cherry-picking, conditionality, or whatever we want to call it, is one of the very worst features of the humanitarian system. And it is not only, or even mainly about better needs assessment. Despite all the talk about meeting needs and about how each of our systems is actually not that bad, earmarking and the piecemeal decision-making process that takes place in a dozen capitals, filtering its way slowly through a dozen executing agencies (or a hundred) in three and six month tranches, is no way to run an emergency operation. We would never run a fire department or a police department or a hospital this way.

We have assessed funding for peacekeeping operations because we understand inherently that the military must have adequate, timely and predictable funding. We know this. We don't talk about this as “idealistic” or “unrealistic”. Why is assessed funding so obviously necessary when it comes to *protecting* lives, but not when it is about saving them in moments of great desperation and peril? We talk about the need for better planning, and for better capacities among NGOs and UN agencies, but when they are funded on a short-term project-by-project basis, we make this impossible. Such a system does not strengthen capacities, it weakens them.

In our book we say that it is time to stop denying the obvious and to start thinking about this impossible, idealistic, unrealistic idea. We are not proposing that all humanitarian assistance should be assessed; we are saying that we can no longer avoid a discussion about some level of assessment. Whimsical, politicized and frequently late decisions are a disgrace to the humanitarian objective. The most important paper presented at this meeting is the one prepared by Development Initiatives on funding models. The DI paper shows that there are a dozen other approaches to pooled funding, trust funds and so on, and that donors participate in them willingly, finding them neither impossible nor idealistic.

The time has come to end the denial on this subject, and to find ways of moving forward. The DI paper provides that opportunity, and DFID's offer to hold a separate meeting on the subject provides the champion.

## **Transition**

Despite fifteen years of debate on where, or even whether transition fits into the world of humanitarian action, despite years of debate about whether it is a continuum or a

“contiguum”, whether it detracts from humanitarian action and budgets or strengthens them, whether it encourages mandate creep or not – and if so whether this is a bad or a good thing – we seem not to be much further ahead. Donors *have* established a few important transition initiatives, but these are small in relation to the need, and they are mostly still located in a limbo somewhere between the two solitudes of relief and development.

At this meeting we have had long descriptions of technique, but not about the more substantive issue, which is whether and where transition programming fits into humanitarian donorship. If it does, how do we ensure adequate and effective delivery? If it does not, how do we ensure that it is properly addressed by others?

Arguably the transition debate is more important to humanitarian actors than others, because humanitarian organizations cannot afford to see the people whose lives they have saved dumped off the back of a truck into situations that are recipe for a return to conflict or starvation. But that continues to happen, and yesterday’s forgotten emergency becomes today’s forgotten development crisis – and perhaps tomorrow’s next forgotten emergency.

The GHD cannot avoid a longer and deeper discussion on this topic if it is to be true to its overarching objectives.

### **The Civilian-Military or Security-Humanitarian Interface**

This vexed and hugely complex subject arises twice in the GHD principles and has been touched upon in the meeting in various ways, not least in discussions about definitions and basic humanitarian principles. The issue is one of huge importance to front line agencies, but they are no clearer and no more unified on the issues than donors are. Consideration might be given in the GHD as to how these important issues can be discussed more broadly, in ways that get beyond dogma, posturing and recrimination. Perhaps there is no *one* solution; perhaps the solution is actually a *process*, a continuing dialogue, and the need for open minds among all of those involved in humanitarian action.

### **Learning and Accountability**

It is worth going back to Stockholm when considering the initiative to include humanitarian assistance in the DAC peer review process. At Stockholm, there was considerable discussion about the almost complete absence of evaluation of donor behaviour in advancing or retarding humanitarian action. Evaluations focus almost only and always on the front line agencies, as though the timing of a decision, or the terms of reference, or the earmarking, or the adequacy of funding have nothing at all to do with outcomes.

But at Stockholm, there was a great reluctance to deal with this in a forthright manner, and so proposals were watered down into a plan to “invite” the DAC to “consider ways”

to cover humanitarian action in peer reviews. That the DAC was able to respond is a hugely positive achievement, and the warning that this has not yet been fully or widely accepted in the DAC is a call for all donor governments to push for greater buy-in. By “mainstreaming” humanitarian assistance in peer reviews, new norms will be established, and by giving the GHD a home in the DAC – or at least a home away from home – all donors will have something to aim for, no matter how ambivalent they may be about the GHD.

But DAC peer reviews are not enough. They are not even remotely enough. We need at least two additional kinds of evaluation:

- Independent and specific evaluations – independent in the way donors require independent evaluations of UN agencies, the Red Cross and NGOs – independent evaluations of donor approaches to specific emergencies, to sectoral challenges and cross-cutting themes;
- Regular inclusion in all humanitarian evaluations of the specific role played by donors in the achievement of goals.

Remember, the GHD is about *donors*, not implementing partners.

The GHD could establish a sub-group on evaluation to develop some pilots and to consider how these questions can be “mainstreamed” into humanitarian action.

And finally, there is the question of evaluating the GHD itself. The progress reports suggest that the GHD could benefit from some of the result-based management that donors are so fond of. Donors, for example, would never allow UN agencies and NGOs to submit plans which talked only of “striving”, “exploring” and “promoting”.

This, of course, is much easier said than done, but if the goals of the GHD are about more predictable and more timely funding, less earmarking, greater flexibility and a more equitable distribution of support among and within emergencies, these all lend themselves to benchmarking and targeting. Greater burden sharing, the harmonization of reporting, and a more comprehensive approach to the evaluation of donor action also lend themselves to both qualitative and quantitative assessment over time.

Several people at the conference have said that we need to move from talk to action. We also need to demonstrate that the action is having a positive impact on those we seek to serve through our humanitarian action.