Cracks in the machine: Is the humanitarian system fit for purpose?

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Whilst much progress has been made in the past decade on fundamental research to better understand how humanitarian crises are generated, evolve and recede, and on deriving aid interventions based on these evidence driven models, far less progress has been made on understanding why the aid system is so slow in taking up and using evidence based policy and practice.

This paper will examine five features of the aid system and architecture which seem to inhibit its ability to move to an evidence based model.

1: The inertial of starting models and narrative. Once set in motion aid programs have great difficulty in changing track and adapting to new evidence. We will examine the role of risk taking, finance and human resource systems in driving inertia.

2: The utility of data, particularly needs assessment data in the framing of programming decisions. Needs assessment seems to come a poor second to cash flow, program momentum and political framing in program decision making. In particular we will examine the way data is used to both initiate response ad to adjust response on an on-going basis and on a year to year basis for recurring disasters.

3: Compliance regimes. The need to be accountable and the mechanism of accountability presently used seem to act as a constraint to risk taking and program innovation thus reducing the value agencies put on evidence. The evolution of compliance over the past decade will be examined and the reaction of agency systems to it.

4: The allure of dominant narratives. Both the global security narrative and the pervasiveness of market methodologies to meet both probate and social needs, discourages

agencies from being evidence driven. Both these narratives are shifting from the realm of politically contentious to that f accepted pratice.

5: The longevity of crisis and crisis response. Long drawn out operations seem to encourage the use of off-the-shelf previously tested programming rather than innovation and program adaptation.

The paper will examine all five of these feature and will go on to look at how the aid environment, for promoting evidence based aid, is likely to evolve, paying particular attention to the evolving nature of crises, driven by urbanization, globalization and climate change, and the evolving aid community, with particular attention to host states, non-western aid agencies and non-OECD donors.