

You Say You Want a Devolution Prospects for remodeling humanitarian assistance

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“In my view, a more sustainable approach would be to re-orient the focus of our efforts toward the concept of building up the capacity of governments, and civil society organizations, to meet their own responsibilities...Humanitarian organizations exist to meet basic human needs when responsible actors cannot, or when they fail to do so for political reasons; our first line of response must be to prevent this from occurring.”

Sergio Vieira de Mello
2000

Every so often representatives of international assistance organizations will declare that their ultimate goal is to “work themselves out of business.” By this they mean that through addressing the root causes of poverty and conflict, and strengthening local capacities to prevent, cope with, and mitigate the effects of emergencies, they strive towards a vision of the future in which their interventions will not be needed. A worthwhile aspiration surely, but does it reflect a genuine objective incorporated into the long term strategic planning of these organizations? Or is it simply an aid worker’s platitude along the lines of “teach a man to fish”? As part of the continuing institutional evolution and professionalization of humanitarian organizations, they have made serious efforts at improving planning, and recently some have jointly endeavored to look beyond the typically short-term horizon of relief operations into what their field might look like in future decades. None of these initiatives, however, have seriously taken up the question of how the northern-based aid community might begin to effect an actual “indigenization” of humanitarian response, devolving it to the level where the countries and regions most often on the receiving end of humanitarian assistance would assume the leading roles for designing and managing it. This article looks at some of the arguments for, and formidable obstacles to, a true devolution in the international humanitarian system.

The last resort as a first response: an irrational system of aid

In the last decade of the twentieth century, complex humanitarian emergencies in the developing world increased five-fold, while the capacities of the affected nations to respond to them declined. Although there have been many improvements made to the

international aid system since the early 1990s, it has not met the challenge of providing adequate relief assistance to the over 40 million people in need of it around the world. As of this writing an estimated two million civilian victims in D.R. Congo are suffering and dying beyond the reach of international humanitarian assistance.

To their great credit, humanitarian practitioners are nothing if not introspective and self-critical, and many of the problems in the humanitarian system are by now well documented and familiar: financial resources that fall short of global needs are distributed inequitably across regions; misuse of aid resources can result in diversions by conflict belligerents or dependencies among the affected populations; and short term funding cycles for emergency aid response makes transitioning to recovery and development programming - let alone preparing for the next emergency - nigh on impossible.

Yet despite a sense of widespread dissatisfaction with the “global volunteer fire department,” as the humanitarian system has been called, we seem not to have reached the point where its professionals can begin to grapple with its deeper, structural pathologies. The humanitarian reform movements of recent years have instead focused on tweaking the current system of donor and agencies, raising operational standards and improving coordination mechanisms. The system’s fundamental irrationalities have taken on the air of the inevitable, even as they are hard to justify. Consequently we are left, on the one hand, with tragically underserved humanitarian crises in places such as West and Central Africa, and on the other hand with a repeating pattern of high profile emergencies into which the international community funnels millions or billions of aid dollars, only to have most of it flow back out in expatriate salaries, off-site procurement, and commercial contracts.

Strictly from an effectiveness standpoint, three fundamental flaws in the structure of the international aid system are clear:

1) It is reactive.

The disproportionate investment in crisis response rather than preparedness capacity exacts undue costs in lives and resources, impeding the timely and efficient provision of life-saving aid. The prevailing model of short-term project grants, negotiated between donor governments and aid agencies *after* an emergency’s onset, creates indefensible delays in aid delivery and greater overall expenses.

2) It is overwhelmingly “northern/western” in its personnel and institutions.

The responsibility for financing, designing, and delivering aid has come to reside predominantly with a small group of agencies and donors from the advanced industrialized nations.¹ And while the international aid agencies rely on large locally hired staffs to implement their programs, the senior management positions of most of them remain filled by western expatriates. Not only does this fuel the detrimental (and paternalistic) image of assistance as north-to-south charity, but the lack of genuine participation of by the recipient countries/regions in the leadership of humanitarian operations also seriously detracts from the quality and appropriateness of assistance. This brings us to the third major flaw in the humanitarian architecture:

3) It is driven by supply rather than needs.

The form and substance of humanitarian response is determined in large part by what agencies and donors have to give and the projects they wish to implement, which often do not meet all needs or bolster existing capacities among recipient populations. The perennial problem of insufficient resources both perpetuates and is perpetuated by the structural problems in the humanitarian system. Because international assistance derives from a small and exclusive donor base, devoting finite resources, its application is inevitably selective, with aid dollars flowing to areas of political importance to the donor group while leaving other areas and activities critically under-funded.

An honest attempt to correct these basic failings and rationalize the provision of humanitarian assistance would require a radical rethinking and restructuring of the current international aid architecture. The responsibility of designing, financing and implementing humanitarian action must be broadened beyond the current club of northern donor governments and international agencies, and vested instead with those who have the largest stake in mitigating the crises, who have a contextual understanding of needs and priorities of the affected population, who will place an emphasis on preparedness capacities over the more costly crisis- response model, and who will make use of indigenous talent for professional recruitment.

The preparedness deficit

In humanitarian emergencies time is of the essence, and preparedness can save lives. Unfortunately, the current international system humanitarian invests disproportionately in post-crisis response, while relatively little goes to pre-crisis prevention, mitigation, and preparedness efforts. Humanitarian preparedness is measured in an agency's pre-standing capacity to launch a timely and effective response to emergent situations. Preparedness entails specific material, professional, and financial resources earmarked and available for relief operations, and the organizational structures to rapidly deploy them. The international humanitarian system lacks preparedness on two levels: first, within individual implementing agencies, where reactive funding patterns severely hinder their speed and effectiveness; and second, in the system writ large, where a lack of adequate response capacities in much of the developing world necessitates the use of international relief agencies in the first place.

According to practitioners in some of the frontline agencies, their ability to respond quickly and effectively requires four crucial capacities: 1) a reserve fund of unrestricted money to be drawn upon for emergent needs at the agency's discretion; 2) central or regional preparedness units built into the structure of the organization, including goods and equipment stockpiles and logistical infrastructure; 3) rosters of technical specialists available at short notice; and 4) a cadre of senior level staff paid retainers to be on call or seconded for emergencies. However, because of the nature of humanitarian funding, which is typically in the form of short-term project grants to respond to specific emergencies, such an investment poses a significant challenge to humanitarian agencies, and virtually every agency, UN and non-governmental alike, falls well short of this standard. Often they must reduce their structures and activities in between the large grant flows that accompany major emergencies, and then rebuild their surge capacity with each

new crisis. In fact, without a secure and predictable source of income, organizations encounter real difficulty creating even the most basic preparedness systems. Of the major international aid organizations, only the largest of the large - World Vision - has a permanent standby capacity that allows them to plan for and quickly staff up offices in emergency countries without raiding their other programs of funds and personnel.

In a fundamental sense, the way humanitarian assistance is currently structured – as a voluntary service delivered by northern entities to southern recipients – is inherently reactive and antithetical to the goal of preparedness. Members of the international humanitarian community have endorsed the notion that international efforts should focus on building indigenous preparedness capacity to allow local actors to take ownership of the humanitarian response at the national and regional levels. To this end, international actors would be better used to provide backstopping, technical training, and supplementary resource mobilization, rather than direct service delivery. However, as on other key issues in humanitarian assistance, this consensus appears more in rhetoric than in action. The reality is that international agencies continue to be the first line of response in many emergencies occurring in the developing world.

Major donor governments have also adopted the goals of expanding local capacities to prevent and respond to emergencies. Most of the actual programs to date, however, focus on the first two functions alone. Once an emergency strikes, participation of local entities and professionals in the design and delivery of aid is minimal. For example, when USAID policies and procedures refer to putting in place a structure for responding to disasters, it is a structure externally imposed: stockpiles of imported relief commodities, international service providers identified, etc. In principle the USAID implementing partners undertake these activities with the “involvement” of the local private sector and indigenous NGOs, but what this involvement would consist of is not detailed. Likewise, while collaborations between international and local NGOs are common, they tend to be partnerships of necessity and the moment, with the local groups helping to target beneficiaries and acting as the last links in the delivery chain, as opposed to gearing up for independent response.

Many international agencies have taken indigenous preparedness to mean simply filling local warehouses with relief supplies. This approach, like so much in international humanitarian aid, is “outside-in,” i.e. driven by consideration of the capacities and interests of the international providers as opposed to the realities and needs on the ground. There are some positive exceptions to this general pattern, however, particularly in the area of natural disasters. A prototype is provided by the model of the national associations of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which, with assistance from the International Federation, has responded effectively to many natural and complex crises. The Pan American Health Organization has built an effective regional network of local institutions, personnel, and supplies in the health sector, covering early warning, disaster preparedness, and relief. These resources are available to be shared between countries on a rapid basis in response to emergencies. A few international NGOs have spun off local affiliates who participate as equal members of the federation, or have mentored local partners take up autonomous roles in humanitarian efforts. A rare but promising example of local agencies managing their own emergency response efforts can be found in

Somalia, where CARE, since 1993 under a USAID grant has trained Somali NGOs in emergency management and logistics. CARE serves as a mentor to the local NGOs and then recedes into a coordinating and consultative role once operational competence is reached. The project boasts considerable success, with a remarkably low commodity loss rate (compared with similar relief deliveries) of less than one percent.²

Building humanitarian preparedness capacity at the local level would not mean that there will no longer be any need for international agencies to perform a direct implementation role, especially when faced with emergencies of massive proportions such as the refugee exodus of Rwanda-Zaire in 1994 or Hurricane Mitch. NGOs and multilateral agencies such as UNHCR or ICRC would still be needed in such circumstances to meet a portion of the immediate needs of disaster victims. Rather, it would mean that these international agencies would cease to be the sole or primary players in response efforts, and would shift their main emphasis to training and advisory roles.

The elements of indigenizing preparedness and response capacities at the local level would include the institution of national disaster plans and cross-border mutual aid cooperation agreements in all countries currently lacking them; capacity building efforts targeted to all levels of government, regional organizations, and civil society; and last but not least, managing the influx of international relief agencies in high profile crises, as this inhibits the ability of local actors to engage in and take ownership of humanitarian assistance.³

While it is both possible and necessary to improve the preparedness capacities of international agencies, these measures will be insufficient to address the larger issue of systemic preparedness. The greater problem is how to endow local national and regional actors with the professional and institutional capacity to take the leadership of humanitarian action in their own areas. The international agencies can best accomplish this by embracing new roles for themselves as partners in aid, rather than providers.

Uncultivated human capital

Approximately 2,000 professional positions are filled annually for international relief operations - a global demand that outpaces the current supply of identifiable competent candidates. International relief agencies face two options in hiring: northern expatriate professionals (typically placed in senior positions for the comfort of donors or headquarters), or local professionals. The former option has its downsides in the high costs associated with compensating, transporting, and acclimatizing the expatriate to the field context – compounded by a high turnover rate for these positions. The latter option raises the specter of “brain drain,” where local civil society organizations and government ministries are robbed of their most qualified individuals by a parallel system offering higher salaries.

Most developing countries today, even those undergoing crisis, have a broad range of professionals available for employment in humanitarian response. What they lack are local networks to help identify these professionals and provide them with additional specialized training where necessary. Developing country nations find their access to UN and other international humanitarian training and accreditation programs severely limited. An effort to build the human capital in the countries most in need of indigenous response

capacity would most likely require a proactive effort on the part of donors to develop recruitment and training programs and inter-institutional (including local government, civil society and international agencies) collaboration and secondment arrangements. A 1999 report proposed the creation of a certification program for national and regionally located professionals under the aegis of regional institutions, in collaboration with donors and humanitarian aid agencies, which is now just beginning to be seriously discussed.⁴

A persistent, uncomfortable hierarchy of international agencies over indigenous NGOs (reflected also in the status of expatriate and local hires within agencies) characterizes humanitarian community. It was observed by one practitioner that this strong sense of “us and them” does not exist in other fields, such as the environmental movement, which maintains a vibrant system of organizational linkages at and across all levels – local, national, and global.

Financial and institutional challenges

“Funding by donors of specific humanitarian emergencies tends to be heavily influenced by strategic concerns, media attention, and geographic proximity.”

(US Government, National Intelligence Council, 2002)

Humanitarian assistance emits more readily from governments to countries that are in their back yards, and/or where they perceive national security interests at stake. It is this simple fact that continues to dictate the size and direction of aid flows, despite the hard and worthwhile work many organizations have done in elaborating and promoting humanitarian principles in donorship. The US remains the single largest national donor for humanitarian assistance, calculated last year at \$10 billion. Together with other major donors - Britain, Canada, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and ECHO as a collective actor – the share of the financing is over 90 percent, dwarfing the contributions of all other governments. The members of this small and homogenous northern donor club enjoy an affinity of political and strategic interests, which are inevitably reflected in their funding patterns, and in the inequities of funding across regions and crises.

“If tasked to design from ground zero an institutional structure for delivery of our civilian humanitarian assistance, few would come up with our current structure.” This quote from the interagency review of U.S. humanitarian assistance programs applies equally well to the international humanitarian system as a whole. Arguably it is the curse of institutions in general, since organizational structures, once established, naturally resist downsizing or radical change. National donor agencies are constrained by institutional structures, some dating back to World War II, which are determined by domestic political interests and contribute to gaps in aid coverage and the reactive mode of humanitarian funding. In the United States humanitarian structures, for instance, there is an entire State Department bureau for refugees, but no office in State or USAID is formally mandated to address internally displaced populations, which vastly outnumber refugees in today’s complex emergencies. Many donors maintain separate funding sources for relief aid and development assistance, with the former reliant on supplemental appropriations after a crisis occurs, and an inevitable funding gap that occurs during the

transitional recovery period after the acute crisis has ended but before normal development aid resumes.

The implementing agencies feel trapped (arguably a trap of their own making) in the crisis-response cycle, unable to plan or invest for the long term because they must struggle to meet immediate needs using short-range mechanisms and resources. Despite significant strides at improving coordination and collaboration, both within the UN system and throughout the broader humanitarian community, they nonetheless remain locked in competition with each other for the resources provided by the small donor club.

Envisioning a Devolved System of Humanitarian Assistance

Devolving the humanitarian response capacity and responsibility down from the global level to one more proximate to the emergencies would require both an appropriate locus of authority, plus the incentive from an organizational standpoint for the current responsibility holders to do so – two rather daunting propositions

The principle of subsidiarity holds that local or lower level functions are more effectively handled by local or subordinate bodies, rather than by the dominant central organization. In the case of international humanitarian assistance, the locus of responsibility has come to lie in the center, or global level, despite the fact that no “dominant central organization” exists, merely a hodgepodge of agencies and interests operating within and around the UN system.

Although the UN Charter envisioned a set of subsidiary functions located at the regional level, most regional organizations remain underdeveloped and therefore largely ignored in humanitarian response. Consequently, when a humanitarian emergency occurs that is beyond the coping powers of the affected nations, the call for assistance jumps immediately to the global level, with no subsidiary stage of regional cooperative response. Response times are unavoidably delayed, as the nation(s) in crisis must request international assistance and wait for field teams to be deployed, commodities to be purchased (often from a different region) and shipped, and distribution infrastructures to be developed and superimposed on the affected locality. Moreover, since the main humanitarian actors in this scenario are generally not from the region in question, they have less familiarity with the pre-existing vulnerabilities and strengths of the affected populations, and no long-term stake in bolstering local economies and institutions as a part of the response effort.

Ten years after the United Nations restructured its humanitarian architecture, - replacing the cumbersome and dilatory Department of Humanitarian Affairs with a new Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; creating an Inter-Agency Standing Committee to facilitate communication and coordination between the numerous UN agencies with humanitarian mandates and functions; and establishing the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) to pool and channel relief aid contributions from donor nations – the results are profoundly disappointing. Donor nations have increasingly opted to channel their aid contributions through bilateral means, via restricted grants to NGOs or international agencies for specific project purposes, leaving the CAP consistently under-funded with typically only 30 percent of requirements covered by contributions. Practitioners have

questioned the usefulness of the CAP in any case, claiming it amounts to merely a compilation of agencies' project wish lists, not a comprehensive and objective assessment of local needs. CAP participation continues to decline despite strenuous UN efforts over the past three years to improve it. Overall, even with good efforts to analyze and integrate data from previous aid operations, when disaster strikes the same unwieldy machinery kicks into gear again, with the same UN agency turf battles and NGO land rushes, as if lessons of past disasters were never learned.

A devolved model of humanitarian assistance would build on the lessons of successful regional national disaster response systems and adapt them to the political complexities of conflict-related complex emergencies. It would create and strengthen regional institutions and actors to pool resources and design and lead timely and appropriate response activities, while international entities would serve to fill funding gaps and offer technical assistance.

The rising demand for responsibility sharing

Both the United Nations and the international donor community have appealed for and encouraged stronger regional action in conflict management and humanitarian response. In his 1992 report *An Agenda for Peace* Boutros-Boutros Ghali spoke of the need for regional organizations to assume greater political and operational responsibility for conflict prevention and humanitarian action, a theme that has been echoed in the speeches of his successor, Kofi Annan. Beginning in the late 1990s, the major humanitarian donors including the United States and EC, have promoted the "burden-sharing" approach as a means to alter the existing division of resources and responsibility for humanitarian initiatives, namely increasing the financial contributions of "non-traditional donors." The Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity likewise urged OAU member states to take greater action to prevent and respond to humanitarian emergencies. The recently inaugurated African Union, which supplants the OAU, provides for a security council and intra-regional peacekeeping cooperation.

Humanitarian practitioners warn of the danger inherent in the idea of devolving responsibility, i.e. that it may be reduced to a "burden-shifting" agenda, with northern actors seeking to transfer the primary responsibility for humanitarian response to countries or regions without due concern for whether the organizational capacity exists to respond effectively. Indeed, if the action taken were merely to lift what is a minute financial burden for OECD countries and relocate it to the embryonic humanitarian structures in Africa, the results would be disastrous. A systematic responsibility sharing agenda, on the other hand, would seek a new division of labor based on the principles of cooperation and complementarity and reflected in joint capacity building initiatives. In either scenario, the concept foresees an increased involvement of regional organizations in humanitarian affairs.

The potential of regional actors in humanitarian action

In theory, regional or sub-regional actors would be better placed on many counts, than the current global (read northern) system to mount a locally appropriate and cost effective response. Their advantages, among others, would lie in more readily prioritizing needs, identifying existing coping and response capacities to be strengthened, and making use of

local markets for procurement. Furthermore, a number of regional intergovernmental bodies seem poised to fill the gap. Since the mid-1980s, some 15 regional and sub-regional organizations have developed or proposed more than 25 humanitarian mechanisms, and have clearly demonstrated the will to move into this new area of cooperation. Regional organizations in the Caribbean Basin, Africa, and Asia are developing or have plans to develop information sharing and early-warning systems, standby arrangements, emergency reserve funds, codes of conduct and even direct response mechanisms. It is important, however, to separate stated intentions and wishful thinking from reality.

Regional intergovernmental organizations

Emergencies are rarely confined to national borders, and successful prevention, preparation, reaction and rehabilitation initiatives often require inter-governmental cooperation. Regional organizations have the potential ability to pool resources and to coordinate national efforts. Furthermore, they would bring knowledge of current and existing problems, early-warning capacities, and coping mechanisms. Significantly, their participation breeds a sense of ownership of the process, which lends greater legitimacy to humanitarian action.

As of 2000 there were 48 major regional and subregional organizations and at least eleven disaster management and response initiatives in varying stages of development.⁵ Currently, Latin America and the Caribbean basin region enjoy the most dynamic and widest range of humanitarian instruments, having intensified cooperation among member states and attracted considerable international support. The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency (CDERA), the Coordination Center for the Prevention of Natural Disaster in Central America (CEPREDENAC), and the mechanisms under WHO's Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) are considered models of cooperative regional response to natural disasters. Compared to these organizations, Asian organizations such as SAARC and ASEAN have less developed disaster management mechanisms. However, non-governmental agencies such as the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center and coalitions such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific are engaging regional organizations to develop disaster management capacities.

In Africa, a continent beset by both complex political emergencies and natural disasters, four sub-regional organizations had by 2000 created or proposed new cooperative mechanisms to respond to disasters, predict and mitigate drought, enhance food security, improve communications with donors, and undertake early warning and research initiatives: the Horn of Africa's Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS). What in 2000 seemed so promising has thus far failed to live up to hopes. IGAD and SADC remain under-resourced and more than a little disorganized. SADC's failure to raise the alarm about the impending famine across six southern African countries in 2001 was a particular disappointment, and resulted in its being shunted aside as the UN imported its own sub-regional humanitarian mechanism

the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination and Support Office (RIACSO) based in South Africa.

Currently, most developing countries and their intergovernmental regional organizations lack both the responsibility and the capacity for humanitarian action. Creating the capacity and relocating the responsibility for humanitarian response to the regional level would require a concerted, multi-phased investment and action strategy of the current donors and implementers to affect A) a shift in emphasis from international reaction to indigenous preparedness; B) an enhanced supply of trained national and regional professionals to design, implement and manage the activities; and finally C) the institutional framework to serve as a locus of authority and coordination of these efforts. Regional organizations may be seen as at least potential candidates to fill this institutional role, complemented and augmented by a larger network of local and regional NGOs and civil society that would need to be brought into an effective regional infrastructure for humanitarian assistance.

All discussion on this issue typically comes to a screeching halt at the question of financing. The funding simply does not exist, they argue, nor is it likely to be forthcoming given donors' proclivities, for developing the capacity of regional bodies in to assume the leadership of humanitarian action in their own regions. The funding situation turns out not to be as grave as predicted by humanitarians a few years back. While during the 1990s aid contributions fell relative to GNP and the donors' response to CAP appeals declined, in real terms humanitarian contributions have increased. Furthermore, developing countries do contribute to relief efforts, but not in ways that the international system generally accounts for. The impression created by the current tracking system of humanitarian contributions is that of a unidirectional financial flow from the developed to the developing countries, while the cash and in kind contributions of local communities and national governments of affected and neighboring countries are generally overlooked.

The resource base does need to be widened, however, to encompass donors, implementers and activities beyond and the current northern club, creating space and formal channels for local responsibility sharing and action. There are at least two possible ways this could begin to be done: 1) By reallocating current contributions. Even if one accepts that the longstanding UN proposal for donor governments to raise their annual aid contribution to .7% of GNP will not be achieved in the near future, donors could change the way their current levels of funding are used, building on steps they have already begun to take, such as capacity building grants for indigenous organizations and mentoring incentives for international agencies. 2) By increasing and formalizing the contributions of developing nations. Over the past several decades some regional organizations and development banks have established humanitarian emergency funds, mobilizing resources even in some of the poorest regions of the world. A group of "emerging" or "non-traditional" donors are being courted by the international humanitarian system to regularize and increase their contributions.

Moreover, preliminary but provocative projections have been made regarding developing countries' capacities to contribute to a humanitarian fund for their regions. Over 100

million annually could be raised through such means as a ten percent “humanitarian tax” on arms exports, or an assessed contribution of one percent of the average fraction of African GNP that goes to arms expenditures.⁶

Civil society

As the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, India demonstrated, in some areas the indigenous NGOs are now in the forefront of humanitarian relief, responding more quickly than even the national military forces. The current and potential contributions of these actors must not be undervalued. While regional organizations may potentially be the appropriate institutional locus, the objective to strengthen humanitarian assistance would be better achieved by broadening the focus to encompass other regional actors and institutions, including member governments, NGOs, and civil society networks. Currently there is little in the regional literature assessing existing cooperation between regional organizations and non-governmental organizations, or proposing ways to make such cooperation more effective. An important part of a regional organization’s capacity for humanitarian action must be seen in terms of how well they coordinate and support the activities of non-state actors, such as local NGOs and community-based organizations. Other reasons for looking at the broader regional environment as opposed to simply the existing regional institutions include the need to identify all available assets that can be brought to bear on countering the causes and consequences of humanitarian emergencies. It also permits a discussion on regions where inter-governmental arrangements do not exist. Finally, a broader regional framework injects a political perspective that might be lost by focusing on the functional capacities of regional organizations.

A new role for the international agencies?

In the face of the scope of recent complex emergencies, the growth and vitality of the developing world NGO sector, and the widespread recognition that relief and development efforts must be truly participatory if they are to be sustainable, the large international agencies no longer find it effective to go it alone. Rather, they seek to position themselves as a “partner of choice” with local and other international organizations. Some international organizations have accomplished this by cultivating and mentoring local organizations, to which they then transfer greater and greater responsibility for projects. Most of the prominent relief and development NGOs (such as CARE, MSF, Oxfam, Save the Children, and World Vision) now strive for mixed boards, projects that are locally initiated and designed, and multiple partnerships and affiliates around the world.

This indigenization movement among agencies is essentially ad hoc and unrelated to any long-term vision outside of the agency’s own multi-year plan, yet may be seen as a harbinger of a larger devolutionary trend in international cooperation. In acknowledging this possibility and addressing its broader ramifications, the humanitarian community must ask the question: what would be the most appropriate division of labor between international and local actors, and how can this best be realized? In addition, what measures need to be taken to ensure adherence to accepted international standards and principles of humanitarian assistance? Finally, how can efforts to decentralize humanitarian assistance complement what is already going on in the south, particularly at the level of regional and sub-regional organizations, rather than create new mechanisms?

Proposing to develop regional loci for humanitarian response is not to suggest that the international agencies will be made obsolete, for, sadly, there will always be emergency circumstances where multilateral agencies and international NGOs can make unique and valuable contributions, or where they create an indispensable international presence. The larger agencies possess decades of operational experience in a variety of settings, and provide an invaluable training resource, and some organizations have begun to put this wealth of knowledge into manuals and teaching tools for southern counterparts. Technical assistance, operational quality standards monitoring and internationally-based human rights advocacy are other important functions that international agencies could continue to provide in a devolved humanitarian system. When partnering with a local NGO, the international agency can help to enhance the profile and credibility of local actors with the national government, regional organization, and international community.

A devolved humanitarian system would not be easily achieved, but current trends point in that direction. Broadly speaking, three things would need to happen: First, the donor governments must be willing to cede some control over their contributions and make the investment in building regional capacities *before* the crisis erupts. Second, the current frontline agencies must begin to seriously reassess their roles as direct providers, and consider instead their comparative advantage as technical advisors, mentors, and resource mobilizers for indigenous organizations. Finally, developing countries require stronger regional institutions to pool their resources and increase their capacity for emergency response. Until such time as the gaze is shifted from the collective navel, the west's humanitarian practitioners and observers, this author included, will no doubt continue to focus on the peculiarities and potential of the current system, tweaking the operational and coordination machinery.

The international humanitarian organizations have faced and endured tremendous obstacles - including mounting casualty rates of staff killed or injured in the field - to serve unhappily as the primary international response to many of the world's worst crises. They have achieved much, and will continue to be needed. Humanitarian professionals themselves have generated some of the most penetrating criticism and toughminded prescriptions for change in the assistance field over the past decade. They straddle the spheres of the international donors and the recipient countries, having a certain degree of influence in both. Who better suited to begin the dialogue about relocating responsibility and capacity for relief aid closer to the areas that need it? Their challenge now is to rethink their missions and the system in which they operate beyond band-aid enhancements, to a broader re-conceptualization of humanitarian assistance.

In fits and starts, the processes of devolution have already begun. The international humanitarian aid community can choose to take a proactive stance in seeing it through, or, true to past form, can scramble to adapt to the changing environment at the expense of the people they purport to serve.

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NOTES

¹ Note: this refers to “official” international humanitarian aid as reported to the OECD/DAC. The system has yet to find a way to adequately account for the cash and in-kind donations of “non-traditional” donor governments in the Middle East and Asia, local organizations, and Islamic charities.

² CARE’s project, entitled “NGO Partnerships for Emergency Preparedness,” is part of a larger capacity building program for Somali civil society.

³ Recommendations are drawn from the Center on International Cooperation’s March 2000 conference on New Dimensions in Humanitarian Assistance.

⁴ Salomons, Dirk (1999) Building Regional and National Capacities for Leadership in Humanitarian Assistance, Center on International Cooperation. Available [online]: www.nyu.edu/pages/cic/projects/humanassist/publication.html

⁵ Disaster Management Initiatives include: disaster planning, early-warning mechanisms, food security programs, drought prevention, emergency relief funds. Graybow, Iacopetta and O’Brien (2000)

⁶ “The capacity to contribute: some projections” Source: O’Brien, David (1999) *Regional Burden Sharing for Humanitarian Action*, Center on International Cooperation. Available online: [www.nyu.edu/pages/cic/projects/humanassist/ publication.html](http://www.nyu.edu/pages/cic/projects/humanassist/publication.html)

Projection 1: How much could be raised from a humanitarian tax on arms exports? The US, UK, France, Germany and other Western Europe and NATO countries exported over \$1 billion dollars worth of conventional weapons to Africa between 1993-1995. A ten percent humanitarian tax on arms exports to Africa would have generated \$104,000,000 over those two years. This tax could be raised or lowered to account for the security needs, and materiel for regional stand-by peacekeeping forces could be exempt. A tax on arms should not discourage the development of regional peacekeeping capacities or collective security arrangements.

Projection 2: If 1% of Africa's average fraction of GNP allocated to defense was invested in a humanitarian assistance fund during 1996, \$142,652,440 could have been raised (Annex 4 Column 3). Even with such a low contribution relative to defense, this amount represents roughly 12% of the 1996 CAP requirements for Africa.

Projection 3: If the above projection is calculated using respective country expenditures on defense in 1995, rather than the African average, \$118,634,420 could have been raised for a humanitarian contingency fund. Aware of the bias implied by using only one-year observations on defense expenditures, if each African country contributed 1% of the African average of defense expenditures using 1985 and 1995 figures, Africa would have set aside \$155,858,440. If each country contributed 1% of the average of what their respective defense expenditures were in 1985 and 1995, \$167,813,961 would have been generated. In light of the practical difficulties in collecting taxes, an alternative is for African governments and their respective regional organizations to declare that humanitarian assistance is part and parcel of national security and should be funded on a percentage base of defense expenditure.

Projection 4: Pakistan, with an income per capita roughly equal to the median of the distribution of African per capita GNP, was one of the few developing countries that contributed to the CAP in 1996. In that year, Pakistan contributed 0.0018% of its GNP (a total of \$1,057,645, or 0.8 cents per capita). Annex 5 shows that if all African countries were to contribute on the basis of Pakistan's percentage, i.e., \$18 for every million dollar of GNP produced, African countries would have set aside \$7,242,264 for emergency relief in 1996.

Projection 5: Low-income countries (>\$765 GNP per capita) contributed on average \$19 for every \$1,000,000 of GNP produced; lower-middle income countries (\$766 to \$3,035 GNP per capita) contributed \$4 for every \$1,000,000 of GNP produced; middle income countries (\$3,036 to \$9,385 GNP per capita) contributed \$8 for every \$1,000,000 of GNP produced. It is interesting to note from this data set that high income countries make the largest humanitarian contribution (\$215 for every \$1,000,000 of GNP produced) but that the few low income countries, those who are the least able to provide, made the second largest contribution to humanitarian assistance in GNP *per capita* terms. Using these income level categories, \$4,040,289 would have been raised in 1996 if all African countries contributed a fraction of their GNP based on their income level.

Admittedly, projections 4 and 5 do not come close to the resources humanitarian emergencies in Africa have demanded. Projections 1, 2 and 3, however, would generate over \$100 million. Divided equally among the five sub-regions, each regional organization would have more than \$20 million to capitalize a humanitarian fund.