

Proportion and distortion in humanitarian assistance

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2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the functioning of the humanitarian system in 2005 through the lens of a set of 43 evaluations deposited with ALNAP (the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in humanitarian action). It will explore the relationship between needs and the allocation of humanitarian aid, seeking to illustrate and illuminate questions of distortion and proportion in the humanitarian system.

The issue of proportion and distortion has been identified as a matter for concern in ALNAP Reviews of humanitarian action since 2001. The 2003 Review observed wide variation in the allocation of humanitarian funding during the 1990s, with people in Ethiopia receiving only \$2 per head while those in Bosnia-Herzegovina received \$116 per head (ALNAP, 2003, p 14). The same Review went on to note that this was not by accident but because of ‘distortion’ caused mainly by political factors. The 2004 ALNAP Review found that ‘inequities in funding continue’, with over 80 per cent of requirements already pledged for the Tsunami response compared with only around 40 per cent pledged for Sudan and the DRC (ALNAP, 2004, p 18). It summarised the reasons for these inequities as ‘national interest, geopolitical interest and media focus’ and noted, as did the 2003 Review, that the issue had not often been recognised by evaluators.

Until now, the issue of proportionality has not been the main theme of an ALNAP Review. In 2003 the Review focused on Southern Africa and Afghanistan and in 2004 on Darfur, Sudan. The Indian Ocean Tsunami Disaster might have been the obvious focus for 2005, but, instead of looking at the response itself, the current Review examines the implications of the response, and the wider context. The overwhelming scale of funds available for the Tsunami response has finally attracted the direct attention of evaluators. Both the DEC Summary (Vaux et al, 2005) and TEC Synthesis report (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006) give the issue considerable importance, arguing that ways should be found to divert funds from the most heavily funded disasters to those that are neglected.

The underlying principle of humanitarianism is that aid should be allocated according to need. This is the first and most fundamental principle of the Red Cross Code¹ and is widely reflected in the mandates of aid organisations. But, in practice,

aid is subject to political influence and the media. The architecture of aid has taken a particular shape over the years and now reflects its own vested interests. At the level of projects, aid flows through managers and aid workers who have biases of their own and are susceptible to local pressures. At each level there are ‘distortions’ of the humanitarian principle.

This review seeks to identify key areas of distortion and to examine how they affect humanitarian practice. This analysis is divided into three sections (2.2–2.4 below), on: international political and media influences, structural issues and local interests. The evaluation dataset offers the opportunity to examine what actually happens in the humanitarian system, rather than repeating the general analysis of current trends (of which Vaux (2006) gives a recent summary). This review examines what happens when the shortfall in funding is greater or lesser. For example, high levels of funding tend to create pressures to spend fast, through an operational style, while lower levels of funding lead to more measured and participatory responses. Similarly, the review will explore how aid structures and local interests cause distortions in relation to needs. The food-aid ‘lobby’ tends to operate against the logic of cash distribution, while a gender focus may lead to increased aid for women and girls when help for boys and men may be equally necessary.

ALNAP’s dataset of evaluations for 2005 consists of 43 evaluation reports that agencies have chosen to publish or place on the internet (Table 2.1). The dataset represents only a fraction of the total evaluations conducted and may reflect some biases. Where agencies make a commitment to publish all evaluations, this may inhibit some of the commentary. Others select only those evaluations that they are willing to publish. If this review needs to establish a wider generalisation, reference is made to other studies from a similar period.

In most evaluations, global imbalances are taken as given, even if they arise from serious ‘distortions’ in aid allocations. Some evaluators have been willing to challenge biases that arise from aid structures, notably in the case of food aid, but the majority of evaluations, such as those by WFP, tend to accept the parameters and simply examine programme implementation. This gives the evaluations little significance for outsiders. Many of the most important lessons arise when the evaluator moves ‘out of the box’ and takes a broader view of the task. This raises questions about the role of evaluators in examining the wider context, especially in conflict situations where the context may change radically from the time of planning or where the original context was poorly understood.

Table 2.1 ALNAP evaluation dataset 2005: locations and issues

	DONOR	UN	WORLD BANK	NGO²	TOTAL
AFRICA	8	1	1	3	13
	Burundi (2)	Zambia	Mozambique	Niger	
	DRC (2)			Sierra Leone	
	Ethiopia (3)			Zimbabwe	
	Somalia (4)				
ASIA	5	5	1	7	18
	Afghanistan	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Afghanistan	
	India	China		Bangladesh	
	Korea	Iraq		Iraq	
	Pakistan	Nepal		Korea	
	Sri Lanka	Pakistan		Pakistan	
				Tsunami (2)	
LATIN AMERICA	2			2	4
	Caribbean			Haiti (2)	
	Haiti				
ISSUE-BASED	2	5	1		8
	IDPs	Gender	Natural disasters		
	Finnish assistance	Humanitarian response			
	Food targeting	Pilot food projects			
		Impact on UN reform			
TOTAL	17	11	3	12	43

Sadly, relatively few organisations actively disseminate their evaluations. ECHO, UNHCR, WFP and the World Bank are notable exceptions. The proportion of NGO (and Red Cross) evaluations that are published is clearly very low indeed, and much lower than among donors and UN agencies. This is a matter of concern, especially given that NGOs tend to favour transparency and accountability as general

principles for their local counterparts. The sources of the 43 ALNAP 2005 dataset evaluations are:

- Donor, 17 (ECHO, 11; Finland, 1; joint, 5)
- UN, 11 (UNHCR/WHO, 3; UNHCR, 1; UNICEF, 2; OCHA, 1; WFP, 4)
- World Bank, 3
- International NGOs, 12 (CARE, 2; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1; Oxfam, 3; SCF, 1; joint, 5)
- National NGOs, 0.

This study has several limitations. The annual crop of evaluations inevitably reflects a degree of chance. The relatively low proportion of NGO evaluations makes it difficult to assess the impact of global distortion at the ‘middle’ level, while a total absence of evaluations from ‘Southern’ organisations makes it difficult to nuance the analysis on the ground. On the other hand, several of the current evaluations are themselves syntheses of many other studies, notably Borton et al (2005) and IEG (2006), and in the case of joint evaluations may cover the activity of many different organisations with input from different levels. It is fortunate that this year there have been several major comprehensive studies, including a UN review of the humanitarian system, a synthesis of evaluations relating to internally displaced persons, and major studies of natural disasters by the World Bank.

2.2 International political and media influences

2.2.1 Political influences

One of the key documents in the current dataset is the Humanitarian Response Review conducted by the UN as an overview of the whole humanitarian system. This draws attention to issues of proportion and distortion: ‘The uneven support given to forgotten emergencies or neglected needs present the humanitarian organizations and the donors with the dilemma of the equity of their response’ (Adinolfi et al, 2005, p 57). It points out that Iraq and Afghanistan continue to dominate global

humanitarian assistance out of all proportion to the needs, while disasters in Africa receive proportionally much less.

This is surely a serious matter. If the objective of the humanitarian system is to address needs in proportion to their severity, then it is clearly failing in its task. The UN report puts the responsibility squarely on the donors who, in turn, have increasingly acknowledged the problem. The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative, launched in 2003, makes the issue of need-based allocations a key concern. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) has set targets for reducing the gap between responses to different UN appeals.³ The question is whether such good intentions are likely to be reflected in practice.

ActionAid (Cosgrave, 2004), Christian Aid (Christian Aid, 2004) and Oxfam (Oxfam, 2000; 2003) have all published papers on imbalances in humanitarian aid and the issue of 'forgotten emergencies', but none has given the issue high priority or risked a direct challenge to either institutional donors or the Western public. The issue has received surprisingly little attention from aid workers and is only rarely remarked on by evaluators.

There are institutional and self-interested reasons for this silence, but there are also some reasons that are more obviously valid. The overall level of global allocations for humanitarian assistance has continued to rise, and so countries that receive relatively little may still receive more than in the previous year. This is often the point of reference for aid workers and evaluators, rather than the overall pattern. Humanitarian aid for Africa has increased to record levels (Development Initiatives, 2005, p 8). In 2003, Ethiopia rose to second place in the table of humanitarian assistance, behind Iraq but ahead of Afghanistan, and with a greater amount of funding than ever before (Development Initiatives, 2005, p 9).⁴

Moreover, to some considerable extent humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan and Iraq has been additional (Development Initiatives, 2005, p 27), or more exactly derived from general reserves that had not been allocated to a specific use. Accordingly, it is difficult to quantify the impact on other budgets. It is also difficult to specify the effects of diversion of staff and management capacity. If they had not been busy with Iraq and the Tsunami Disaster, would donors and NGOs have done a better job in Darfur and DRC? This seems likely, but is difficult to quantify.

Data relating to imbalances in global humanitarian assistance are readily available, in the publications of Development Initiatives (2003; 2005). Currently, the Global War on Terror appears to be a major source of imbalance, with excessive focus on Afghanistan and Iraq. Political factors have always influenced donor priorities to a greater or lesser extent. This is not a new problem but it has taken a specific form. The Cold War caused humanitarian aid to be closely linked to political interests, especially in Central America. Today's security interests focus on Islamic areas of the world.

Finally, although it appears that humanitarian aid may be increasing at the expense of development aid (Development Initiatives, 2005, pp 5, 15), it is difficult to specify what has been lost in terms of development. There has been no campaign or protest about this, perhaps because it would be difficult to do so without seeming to question the need for more humanitarian aid.

Because humanitarian action in most locations receives more funding than in the past, aid workers and evaluators either remain unaware of the imbalances or accept them as given. For these various reasons, the problem is 'invisible' and aid workers become conscious of it only in spectacular cases where funding rises to an extraordinary level, as in Kosovo, Iraq and the Tsunami Disaster. Aid workers may also be wary of the issue because it seems to be intractable. Although the Western public may have noted that only certain disasters result in public appeals, it receives little information about imbalances in the overall system. In the case of the Tsunami, agencies that tried to limit or divert public generosity elsewhere were largely unsuccessful in their efforts (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006, p 86). The problem is deeply rooted in Western political systems which link humanitarian aid to other political objectives, and in public responses that are based on images rather than understanding.

2.2.2 The security bias

Political interests translate on the ground into different notions of security. The dominant Western view gives priority to global security over human security, and this results in a tendency to use humanitarian aid as a way of stabilising countries rather than providing assistance according to needs. The problem is illustrated in reports from the ALNAP dataset on Somalia, Sri Lanka and Iraq.

The Somalia Aid Coordination Body was created more than ten years ago and includes most of the key aid actors in Somalia. It works on the basis of consensus and has produced a code of conduct and guiding principles. It provides general information and has developed strategies for response in different sectors. But according to a recent review (Wiles et al, 2004), there remains ‘a lack of an overarching strategy for international assistance to Somalia’. There is no agreed analysis of the various causes and factors relating to conflict. Instead donors have adopted a ‘global security’ approach and plan their assistance around the notion of a ‘peace dividend’, meaning that they allocate aid to those places and peoples that are peaceful. Aid is allocated as a reward for achieving stability rather than according to the principle of need. By implication, aid is denied or reduced in those areas that are unstable, despite the likelihood that they may have greater needs or might be areas in which aid could be used more effectively.

The Somalia review notes that there is no information available to assess the effectiveness of this strategy; it is not clear whether it acts as an incentive to other areas to improve, or simply creates division and resentment, which conceivably might increase the level of conflict. The review does find, however, that this strategy is not well received by other stakeholders including NGOs: ‘there is widespread misunderstanding about what the peace dividend approach means and considerable scepticism about its appropriateness’ (Wiles et al, 2004).

As the evaluation notes, the problem revolves around the lack of any clear idea about the nature of the conflict and the effectiveness of different strategies. The ‘securitisation’ approach seems to have arisen as a general ‘theory of change’ rather than from a detailed analysis of the Somali context. A review of ‘Aid, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka 2000–2005’ (Goodhand and Klem 2005) identifies a similar donor strategy in Sri Lanka, also based on the idea of a ‘peace dividend’. Incentives to stop fighting take precedence over immediate needs. The review describes this as a ‘conditionality’ approach and goes on to observe that ‘the lesson about peace conditionalities is that, applied crudely and without a strong political process to back them up, they have limited or even perverse impacts’ (Goodhand and Klem, 2005, p 14).

The Sri Lanka review observes also that this approach bears little relationship to analysis of the actual situation. It argues that such strategies have never been proved to work, and are even less appropriate after the Tsunami Disaster where, in an ‘over-funded’ environment, aid cannot be used effectively as a bargaining tool. The review

accepts the notion that donors should use aid to reduce conflict but argues for a much more nuanced strategy of ‘engagement’ based on deeper and more sensitive analysis: ‘Becoming more conflict sensitive necessarily means becoming more political, in the sense of being more attuned to the political context and governance structures within Sri Lanka’ (Goodhand and Klem, 2005). But for busy donors this is a lot more difficult and time-consuming than simply directing aid to those areas that are stable.

It would be a very limited form of humanitarianism that focused only on the outcomes of conflict rather than its causes, but in the current context any attempt to ‘manage’ conflict is susceptible to political pressure. In Iraq and Afghanistan the global-security agenda is at its most explicit and pervasive, and the donor policies identified in Somalia and Sri Lanka are taken to extremes. Humanitarian action is controlled by joint bodies in which military elements are dominant. Aid is used explicitly as a tool of foreign policy. Because NGOs depend on Western governments for their security as well as their funds, they can make little use of humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality.

An evaluation of the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI) (Hansen, 2004) draws attention to the consequences. The behaviour of international NGOs negates ‘the appropriate distance between NGOs and authorities or combatants’ (Hansen, 2004, p 8). The evaluation bravely warns international NGOs that they are setting inappropriate models of the NGO concept for nascent Iraqi NGOs and the new Iraqi authorities. Instead of contributing to the idea of democratic pluralism they are modelling a form of governance in which NGOs lack independence. This might have a long-term negative impact on governance.

The report urges the NGOs to make strenuous efforts to abide by the Red Cross Code and finds that lack of principle leads to severe problems of coordination.

In highly politicised contexts such as Iraq, the inevitable differences of principle and philosophy within the humanitarian community become more apparent and emotionally charged, resulting in diminished readiness of agencies to share information, engage in joint planning or cooperate in other ways. In Iraq, relatively more agencies have opted for a ‘go-it-alone’ approach and have situated themselves outside of coordination structures. (Hansen, 2004, p 10)

The Iraq evaluation shows how politicisation tends to fracture the humanitarian sector and undermine principle. The same process occurs on a global scale. Civil servants in aid departments may sympathise with the notion of impartiality but may not have the freedom to dissociate humanitarian aid from the Global War on Terror. The result is a discrepancy between attempts to strengthen principle, such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative, and clear statements about the prime importance of global security coming from top political leaders.

Among NGOs the line of division falls between those that accept the global-security agenda as their own and those that try to distance themselves from it. Although most NGOs have re-emphasised the principles of impartiality and neutrality, others have taken the view that they should support their country even in its political objectives. This ‘Wilsonian’ approach to humanitarian aid is most evident in the USA, and has caused considerable tension within internationally federated NGOs, such as Save the Children (Stoddard, 2003).

The general implication is that aid actors need sophisticated and shared analyses, especially when they engage in conflict situations. They need to analyse not only the role of local actors but also that of Western governments which may be funding the humanitarian effort. Aid should be analysed as part of the problem as well as part of the solution. If donors then wish to trump the analysis with global-security concerns then at least this will be explicitly understood. Without being a lot smarter about the interests that surround it, the humanitarian system is, as Fiona Terry observes, condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past (Terry, 2002).

Box 2.1 Evaluation and conflict

Conflict often has severe humanitarian consequences and therefore aid actors want to know how their programmes relate to conflict. But the most common bases for evaluations, such as the DAC criteria, provide little explicit guidance for conflict situations. There is no established method for assessing whether responses are ‘relevant’ to conflict. In practice, the evaluator has to make an analysis of the context but is rarely given the time or the remit to do so.

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Box 2.1 Evaluation and conflict *continued*

A joint evaluation of donor responses on Afghanistan illustrates this deficiency. It provides only a short history of the country and offers very little analysis of the ongoing conflict. Although the report contains many judgements about relevance, these are not set against an analysis which explains the conflict. It is therefore impossible to say on the basis of this evaluation whether the responses exacerbate conflict, reduce it or 'do no harm' (Danida Evaluation Department, 2005, pp 37–39).

Nearly half the evaluations in the ALNAP dataset relate to countries experiencing conflict, but only 2 reports of the total 43 systematically examine the impact of the humanitarian response on conflict. One of these is not an evaluation but rather a multi-donor study, 'Aid, Conflict and Peace-building in Sri Lanka' (Goodhand and Klem, 2005). This examines donor responses in Sri Lanka on the basis of a strategic conflict assessment conducted in 2000 and now being updated. It provides a detailed analysis of how and where donor activity interacts with conflict. The report shows that conflict analysis can play an important role in evaluation but must be resourced in proportion to the complexity of the issues.

In the second report, CARE evaluates its rights-based approach (RBA) as a way of responding to conflict in Sierra Leone (Napier, 2004). The study begins with a short presentation of the root causes of the war based on the literature. It finds that, in general, the use of RBA has been positive in relation to conflict. But CARE had to select certain 'rights' for focus within the RBA framework, while others were given lower priority. Equity, empowerment and opposition to discrimination and violence were considered to have been particularly relevant. But the analysis was conducted only at the evaluation stage and the programme choices seem to have been largely intuitive. As the CARE study concludes, 'The design of a rights-based project needs to be grounded in a thorough analysis and understanding of the local social, political and cultural context' (Napier, 2004).

The ALNAP dataset shows that evaluators often have to make sense of a conflict response by making a retrospective conflict analysis. It would clearly be better if this had been done at the outset and the evaluator left to check it, but agencies often underestimate the complexities of working in conflict situations. This issue has become more serious for agencies because their funding often comes from governments concerned with 'global' rather than 'human' security.

For evaluators in conflict situations, the problems are even greater than for the agencies. The evaluators are rarely provided with any explicit analysis and yet they have to assess the appropriateness and relevance of the response. In many cases they skim over the analysis, and focus on delivery. But without analysis of the context, judgements about delivery may be of little real value (Box 2.1).

2.2.3 Media influences

The Tsunami attracted attention as both a spectacular type of disaster and because of the deaths of thousands of Western tourists. Fundraising was further boosted because the disaster occurred at a time when many families were celebrating Christmas (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006, p 83). The level of funds raised by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the UK was more than five times as much as the highest previous appeal (Kosovo), which itself was considerably higher than the next most successful appeal, for the floods in Mozambique, where a significant reason for the success of the appeal was said to be the image of a woman giving birth in a tree. In terms of public response, humanitarianism is a lottery. The problem for humanitarian charities (or NGOs as they prefer to be called) is that they depend on public sympathy and are therefore reluctant to challenge the pattern of public concern. This gives the media a dominant role in shaping public sympathy and responses.

Political and media interests may combine to generate a public response. The Kosovo crisis was relatively small as a humanitarian event but because of political involvement the media observed the unfolding of events, witnessed the human suffering and had ample opportunity to project it to the public over a long period. In effect, political and security interests become converted into public interest, and this was further converted by the aid agencies into humanitarian responses. In recent years the Global War on Terror has given this a particular twist, with disproportionate levels of funding for areas of highest media coverage, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, and other areas with little political interest being neglected.

The pattern of donor-driven responses can be extended through the system even to the local level. Within the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Goma and Ituri crises attracted funding out of proportion to the general level of needs because they happened to receive international media coverage (Borton et al, 2005). Local

media can also distort the response. For example, Oxfam reports in relation to floods in Bangladesh that ‘Unfortunately, most of the humanitarian emergency responses were triggered by the media coverage, both for Oxfam and other agencies. Some of the districts did not get media attention, which delayed humanitarian community and donors’ response’ (Oxfam Evaluation Team, 2005, p 9).

The Oxfam Evaluation Team also finds that ‘The situation could be improved by developing the staff analysis and reporting skills’. But, as Darcy and Hofmann explain in their 2003 study for the Humanitarian Policy Group, the notion of needs is not as simple as it first appears, and the art of needs assessment is remarkably slippery. There is little agreement among humanitarian actors on the nature of ‘needs’. Very often ‘needs’ are narrowed down to a choice between the range of items and services that agencies can most easily supply. Methodologies for needs assessment vary so widely that comparisons within and between countries are impossible. Darcy and Hofmann conclude that, in practice, ‘Most management decisions about humanitarian response are made primarily on the basis of non-formal assessment’ (Darcy and Hofmann, 2003, p 25).

In the Bangladesh case, media pressure was translated to Oxfam through the offices of donors, and spelt out in considerable detail:

The Oxfam flood response was donor-based and it was designed with donor money in mind, and this can detract from a needs based approach. This approach has influenced the number of families to be covered in a district regardless of the severity of the disaster. (Oxfam Evaluation Team, 2005)⁵

The Oxfam evaluation argues that this compromise was unnecessary: ‘Oxfam being an organisation which can attract large amounts of funds immediately, internally and externally, should concentrate on covering more affected areas rather than adopting a more fund/donor based approach’ (Oxfam Evaluation Team, 2005). And the report goes on to urge management to take a more robust position in relation to such pressure.

This unusually frank analysis of practical realities illustrates how easily humanitarian responses can be swayed by what amounts to little more than rumour and personal perception. Instead of commissioning assessments based on common approaches, aid managers compete with each other to offer help in high-profile areas

where the media and politicians are likely to congregate. In the absence of a shared system for assessment, humanitarian outcomes depend on processes of negotiation in which a host of issues arising from agency interests and structures take precedence. Or, in other words, the ‘need’ is largely a construct of different interests and priorities among all the different stakeholders.

Consequently, an agency that takes considerable trouble to establish the facts does not necessarily gain funding support. The problem emanates largely from the donors, but UN agencies and NGOs seem to be defenceless against it. The increase in donor funding for humanitarian purposes in relation to development has led many international NGOs to allocate their un-earmarked funds for core costs and development, and pare down their humanitarian reserves to a minimum.⁶ As NGOs receive a greater share of donor allocations, the budgets of UN agencies have been squeezed (Macrae et al, 2002, pp 3–4). Donor funding remains almost entirely earmarked for specific purposes rather than allocated to general funds that can be drawn upon according to need.

In the Humanitarian Response Review this is noted as ‘a major constraint’ (Adinolfi et al, 2005, p 55). Both the UN and NGOs are very susceptible to donor pressures, and the tendency has been to compete rather than cooperate. In the absence of any concerted effort on the part of these ‘implementing agencies’, allocations of aid will continue to follow the lowest common denominator of political interests, colonial ties, media reports and the personal views of managers. It may be difficult to define what ‘need’ really is, but it is usually fairly easy to recognise when other factors are predominant.

2.2.4 A case of high-level funding: the Tsunami

The DEC evaluation of the Indian Ocean Tsunami response observes that:

The Tsunami Disaster has thrown up a challenge to the whole humanitarian system. A massive response to one disaster is excellent in itself but agencies are not geared up to respond without taking staff resources from other disasters. How can the DEC ensure that the success of one public appeal does not have negative effects in other parts of the world? (DEC, 2005, p 7)

Although the Tsunami Disaster generated massive additional funding, the capacity of the humanitarian system is not entirely elastic. In order to mount such a rapid large-scale response, staff had to be drafted in for the Tsunami response from other needy areas. Moreover, senior management and supporting departments had to devote much of their attention to the Tsunami, neglecting other areas. This lack of ‘surge capacity’ in the humanitarian system has also been noted in the TEC Synthesis evaluation (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006, pp 117–118) and features as a main finding in the UN Humanitarian Response Review (Adinolfi et al, 2005, pp 39–42). The conclusion is that if any single disaster receives disproportionate attention, it is likely to undermine the response elsewhere.

Both the DEC and TEC evaluations observe that the high level of funding for the Tsunami Disaster, together with its high profile, had effects on the form and content of the response. Some of these effects were positive, giving agencies the resources to scale up and experiment. But there were also negative effects. First, according to the DEC and TEC evaluations, the relief phase was extended unduly because agencies were to some extent ‘commodity-led’. So long as they had materials coming through the pipeline to distribute, they continued to distribute them, regardless of changing needs on the ground. Second, pressure for speedy results combined with ample availability of funds led to a more operational style of response with greater reliance on expatriate staff, and a tendency to overlook local capacity. This problem, noted particularly in the TEC Capacities evaluation (Scheper et al, 2006), led to a third problem – a difficulty in moving from relief into recovery mode because relationships with local organisations and local personnel had not been developed during the relief phase.

The TEC Synthesis report concludes that the Tsunami response represented ‘a missed opportunity’ characterised by ‘Supply-driven, unsolicited and inappropriate aid, and inappropriate housing designs and livelihood solutions’ (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006, p 93), and that ‘Allocation and programming, particularly in the first weeks and months of 2005, were driven by politics and funds, not by assessment and need’ (p 20). This lack of proper assessment was also a reason why such a high proportion of funding was used for relief, and the transition to recovery was slow (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006).

Two main conclusions emerge from this. First, an extraordinary response to one disaster will have negative impacts on other disaster responses, even if additional

funds are available. It is impossible to specify these exactly but the crucial elements are transfer of experienced staff and diversion of senior management attention. Second, if there is undue pressure to achieve profile or spend funds rapidly, the quality of the humanitarian response will suffer. Accountability to donors takes precedence over accountability to beneficiaries. In the case of the Tsunami, the international response was effective in terms of relief, but much less so in terms of building local capacities and reducing future vulnerability. Having failed to address these issues in the first year, it will be difficult to tackle them later. It is not that aid agencies always ignore the need to develop local capacity, but that a very high level of funding and high pressure for quick results establish a different order of priorities.

2.2.5 A case of low-level funding: the DRC

The Tsunami Disaster caused over 200,000 deaths, but insecurity in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is thought to have caused 3.9 million deaths between 1999 and 2004 and more than 2 million people have been displaced from their homes on a long-term basis.⁷ According to FAO, the DRC has the highest level of food insecurity in the world, with 75 per cent of the population undernourished (Michael et al, 2004, p 10). Many of the deaths occurred through the indirect effects of war, such as poor health and nutrition. By almost any measure, other than political interest and media coverage, DRC should have been the main focus for humanitarian attention in the last decade.

But this was far from the case. The TEC Synthesis report estimates that international pledges and donations for the Tsunami Disaster exceeded the estimated total economic impact of the Tsunami (\$9.3bn) and provided more than \$7,100 for each person affected (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006, p 20). There are no reliable estimates for numbers 'affected' in the DRC and therefore it is difficult to calculate the level of aid per head but probably this was in the region of \$5–10 during the height of the war.⁸ Total humanitarian assistance provided to DRC in 1995–2001 was less than 10 per cent of what was provided for the Balkans in the same period.⁹ Such figures provide only inexact comparisons, but, whatever method is used, the conclusion must be that people who were affected by the world's worst tragedy of its time received very much less help than those who were affected by disasters that attracted international media attention.

Are there any positive aspects of this low level of funding? Not many. Lack of funding led to unnecessary deaths. But it may be worth asking whether the response was different from that to the Tsunami Disaster. Two evaluations of ECHO's response in DRC confirm that lack of funding had serious negative effects, but also indicate that in small ways agencies were able to make a virtue of necessity. A general study of ECHO's interventions notes that a lack of implementing agencies of sufficient strength was the main constraint on ECHO extending its programmes (Michael et al, 2004).⁴⁰ European NGOs are very few on the ground and, according to this report, 'most partners have reached (or overstepped) the limit of their operational capacity' (Michael et al, 2004, p 25). As a result, both ECHO and its partners in DRC have to operate a kind of triage, choosing between desperate unmet needs and sometimes having to make decisions according to capacity rather than need. ECHO has gone about this in a systematic way, dividing the country into zones based on vulnerability (ECHO (2006) gives the methodology). This makes it possible to prioritise certain areas, although the distinctions are often marginal and the information uncertain. Those areas that are excluded would probably rate very highly in almost any other context.

The response in DRC is hampered by shortage both of resources and capacity. The ECHO evaluation argues that, within DRC, priority should be given to quality of response in specific locations rather than geographical extension. But in the absence of other funding this may mean that other regions receive no aid at all. For example, 'partners face the dilemma between the developmental strategy of supporting a complete health system, and allocation of limited means' (Michael et al, 2004). In practice, aid managers in DRC have to make life-and-death decisions – an especially unfair burden when managers in other situations may be worrying about how to spend funds fast enough.

Even within the prioritised zones in DRC, the level of funding is inadequate for basic humanitarian tasks. Managers have to decide which group, among many in desperate need, should be prioritised above another. There can be no ideal solutions because the funding is simply inadequate.

ECHO is currently spending US\$2.64 per capita/year in the zones its partners are covering. A World Bank estimate that pitches the cost of delivery of basic health services is US\$12 and a more recent WHO opinion is that below US\$10 'no equitable nor effective health care is realistically within the reach of the health sector'. (Michael et al, 2004)

To make matters worse, the costs of delivery are relatively high in DRC because of the effects of war, and the condition of the population is extremely poor, increasing the necessary scale and costs of health and nutrition services.

The classical ‘emergency reasoning’ that children under five and women in fertile age are the most vulnerable and therefore the only target group for nutritional intervention does not apply in the particular situation of the DRC. The protracted emergency has compromised population groups – adolescents and adults – that are not traditionally considered high risk and high priority. (Michael et al, 2004, p 47)

Lack of funding means that user fees have been introduced and then increased in order to support health services. These are charged at a ‘realistic’ rate, with the inevitable risk that very poor people may be excluded. Funding dictates who gets medical care and who does not. When fees were raised between April and October 2004, rates of use fell by 60 per cent (Michael, 2004). User fees may have some advantages in situations where they serve to encourage local engagement and ownership of local health services. But in DRC they simply exclude large numbers of very needy people.

While there was little that agencies could do to save lives after the Tsunami Disaster, in DRC aid could have saved lives. More money for health services would have enabled poor people to gain access. Objectively, aid agencies should be massing in DRC even today, although the worst of the disaster has passed, and should have been rather lightly represented in the aftermath of the Tsunami. But the reverse is the case – and very markedly so.

In practice, the disastrous situation in DRC was treated as a problem of under-resourced development rather than as a humanitarian crisis in which life-saving and minimum standards created an absolute moral responsibility. This may reflect a more general tendency to switch to development mode (‘do what you can’ rather than ‘do what you must’) as a way of avoiding humanitarian responsibilities in those situations that fall victim to the pattern of imbalance and distortion.

This represents a terrible failure of the aid system, but there are some small positive aspects of the response that deserve attention. On the ground, lack of data (because of poverty and the disruption caused by war) and lack of expatriate staff willing to

work in such insecure areas forced aid agencies and donors to give more freedom for local choices and more responsibility to local staff and organisations. The ECHO evaluation team notes that the programme considered had to rely heavily on information provided by local communities. This forced the programme to focus on building local capacity rather than on direct delivery of services:

the poorest or most vulnerable families in a given area can only be identified with well-structured methods of community participation. If the project design is to provide a basis for continued and increasingly developmental approaches, a strong emphasis on beneficiary training, partner capacity building, community participation and involvement of the state structure where this still exists, is necessary. (Michael et al, 2004)

If more funding had been available (perhaps because of some spectacularly successful media exposure) DRC might have experienced a massive expatriate-run operational response, as in the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide, or more recently in the case of the Tsunami Disaster. But DRC suffered from lack of both funding and security. Expatriates were reluctant to go there and this may have reduced the media coverage still further. With little money and few expatriates, decisions and responsibilities in DRC were handed over to local communities, whether or not they could cope with them. As a second ECHO report, which looks specifically at the work of its implementing partner GOAL, notes, 'Growing its own timber is the only way forward for a relatively poor and isolated area' (Michael, 2004).

Ironically, lack of funding and profile may have made agencies more compliant with Red Cross Code principles, such as building local capacities and (thereby) reducing future vulnerabilities. It may have led to a closer relationship with 'beneficiaries' and greater willingness to involve them in decision-making as required by the Code. But none of this should obscure the fact that the most basic of all the principles was violated. The first principle of the Red Cross Code, known as the 'humanitarian imperative', demands that aid should be allocated according to need. On a global scale this was clearly not the case.

The contrast of the DRC response with the Tsunami response demonstrates that lack of funding encourages a closer relationship with beneficiaries, whereas too much funding tends to create a tendency to overlook local capacity. In cases where funding is modest in relation to needs, donor agencies are obliged to play a

supporting role in relation to local capacity. Where funding is lavish in relation to needs, donors and implementing agencies assume a dominant role. As the TEC Capacities evaluation (Scheper et al, 2006) observes, this means that local capacities dwindle in a context of heavy-handed funding, and local actors may even become hostile to foreign agencies and refuse to cooperate in longer-term recovery and reconstruction.

Arguably, 'over-funding' tends to work against good practice but 'under-funding' will result in failure to meet fundamental purposes, and tends to push back to the community responsibilities that the community may be unable to sustain. In terms of timescales, 'over-funding' is more effective in its immediate impact but may be negative in the longer term, whereas under-funded responses may have little immediate impact but might be more effective in the longer term, building capacity and reducing vulnerability. Neither of the extremes is desirable.

Much of the good practice in DRC was not deliberate, but forced on the agencies by circumstances. Participation occurred in order to fill a funding vacuum. Pressures that might have led to posturing for profile, competition and expatriate-led responses were absent. Good practice arose from the absence of negative factors. But there is little sense from the reports that aid workers had a clear idea of upholding principle and holding out for good practice in the face of a challenge. The overall picture is of a humanitarian sector that welcomes the charity of donors rather than asserts 'rights'.

2.3 Structural issues

2.3.1 Imbalances between sectors

The most extreme forms of imbalance occur in the geographical spread of humanitarian assistance, and from a humanitarian perspective these might truly be called 'distortions'. But there are other inequalities in the humanitarian system that are less deliberate but arise from the way in which humanitarian structures have developed over the years. Organisations specialise in certain sectors or types of

response, but as the needs or the analysis changes they continue to follow the same approaches, becoming 'vested interests' within the system. This applies not only to specific institutions but also to the influence of historical momentum within all agencies. There is a tendency to do what has been needed in the past, rather than what needs doing now. The problem is not necessarily self-correcting. Strong agencies in particular sectors have the power to attract greater resources; by implication, other sectors may be neglected.

From the evidence in the ALNAP dataset, how great is this imbalance? The UN Humanitarian Response Review seeks to map the capacity of the entire humanitarian system. It finds particular deficiencies in relation to camp management and protection.

It attributes deficiencies in the water and sanitation sector to discrepancies between stated capacity and real capacity (Adinolfi et al, 2005, p 10). UNICEF often takes responsibility for water and sanitation within the UN but has so many other responsibilities that it has not been able to meet expectations. Although NGOs such as Oxfam have developed significant capacity in the sector, there is still a shortfall, especially in sanitation. A plausible reason for the under-representation of this sector is that it is much less photogenic than, say, child feeding.

Shelter has emerged in the responses to the Tsunami and Pakistan earthquake as another neglected sector, with limited institutional capacity within the UN and no international NGO that is considered pre-eminent in this field. The DEC Tsunami evaluation notes:

A striking feature of the tsunami response has been lack of expertise on post-disaster housing among DEC members. In the absence of a collective approach, this has given rise to an array of house designs which has caused confusion. There is a need for DEC members individually and collectively to enhance their capacity in relation to housing. (DEC, 2005)

Lack of technical expertise in the shelter sector has left agencies open to the pressure for rapid results. Shortly before the anniversary of the Tsunami Disaster there was a rush to start housing projects in order to demonstrate 'success' to the media. Many of these were 'cherry-picked' as the easiest but not necessarily most important projects, and were largely implemented by contractors rather than

through self-help. But as the DEC and TEC evaluations point out, experience over many years clearly indicates that creating permanent housing is a very slow process and it is usually at least a year before the policy environment has been sorted out. Agencies should have worked together to establish a realistic timetable and common plan, but competition won the day. The need for transitional and temporary shelter was largely ignored, and so tens of thousands of people were still living in tents a year after the disaster.

Although the ALNAP dataset includes little material on the Pakistan earthquake,⁴⁴ there are some indications that agencies have engaged more closely and imaginatively with local communities in this response and made much better use of self-help approaches. In a recent edition of *Humanitarian Exchange*, Causton and Saunders (2006) describe how Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has used cash grants with local technical inputs for shelter reconstruction, aiming to provide at least a first room which the occupiers could later improve. Although no evaluation is yet available, the project is said to have been successful in engaging with local beneficiaries and has overcome the problem so poorly addressed in the Tsunami Disaster, the need for transitional housing:

Households themselves chose to develop what was initially envisaged as an 'emergency' shelter programme into the beginnings of permanent housing, and also took responsibility for site planning, the sale or transfer of assets and the use of salvageable resources.... Trusting in the resourcefulness and ingenuity of affected households themselves can prompt creative solutions to perceived challenges, and result in far greater long-term impact. (Causton and Saunders, 2006, p 12)

If agencies are to improve their ability to respond to shelter needs they will have to consolidate and build on the experience of the Tsunami and Pakistan disasters. Part of the problem may be that the need for emergency shelter does not arise in every disaster. There was a long period in the 1990s when this type of expertise was scarcely needed. Agencies may be reluctant to invest in a capacity that is not always in use. Without a strong institutional base, shelter may continue to be neglected in the humanitarian response.

2.3.2 A dominant sector: food aid

At the other extreme, certain sectors are over-represented in the humanitarian system and tend to cause distortion favouring their own area of competence. One of the most striking examples is food aid, which has retained a pre-eminent position in disaster responses despite ever-mounting evidence that cash responses are preferable. The distorting influence of food aid arises primarily because certain donors, notably the USA and Canada, subsidise their domestic food production and are left with surpluses to dispose of. Although the EU has stopped using food aid to dispose of surpluses, there is still a strong tendency for the humanitarian system to favour food aid above other kinds of response.

The policy of food-aid donors is now reinforced by the structures of the humanitarian system. The World Food Programme (WFP) is the largest and most influential UN agency in many disaster-affected countries. This imbalance is not of the UN's making but comes from the donors, and is further exaggerated by their responses to appeals. Smillie and Minear find that 'Although food represents only half of what was requested in most CAPs, it usually received about 75% of donor resources' (Smillie and Minnear, 2004, p 191). So great is the preponderance of food aid in humanitarian responses that a number of NGOs in the USA are reported to have become dependent on food aid as a source of income and have also developed vested interests in the continuation and expansion of food aid (Barrett and Maxwell, 2005).

The problem is further exacerbated by the way in which humanitarian needs are assessed, through the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) of the UN. The deficiencies of the CAP (and its variant the Consolidated Humanitarian Appeals Process or CHAP) have been examined in a number of studies, and are now widely recognised (Darcy and Hoffmann, 2003; Smillie and Minear, 2004).¹² In short, the CAP is little more than a list of the requirements of aid agencies and is almost exclusively focused on the UN. Although donors tend to refer to CAPs as the main measure of need, they are actually based mainly on bids from UN agencies according to what they think they can do rather than the totality of need. As a substantial proportion of the response, including practically all the work of NGOs, takes place outside the CAP, it cannot logically be viewed as a complete estimate of need but is often used as such in the absence of anything else (Smillie and Minear, 2004, p 191). This means that donors base their aid allocations on supply rather than demand.

As stated in the CAPs, 'needs' are likely to represent the relative size and capacity of UN agencies rather than anything else. Food aid often becomes the top priority because WFP is the largest and most active agency. By contrast, agricultural inputs are typically under-represented and, with less capacity in FAO, likely to be under-funded because donors lack confidence. Even those donors which do not need to dispose of food surpluses sometimes subscribe to the 'food aid mindset' of UN appeals. An evaluation of responses to the Ethiopia emergency of 2002–3 concludes that 'despite the escalating crisis, the donor response to the non-food requirements in the appeal remained largely stagnant until March 2003. There was an initial lack of appreciation that the crisis was far more complex than food availability' (Steering Committee, 2004, p 25).

The humanitarian system has not moved far from the 'food availability decline' model of famine which Amartya Sen debunked in 1981 (Sen and Dreze, 1981). It is still common to see calculations for food shortages translated directly into food-aid requirements, without consideration for local purchase or cash inputs that might stimulate local markets. Sen showed that famine was a result of falling entitlements rather than lack of food in the markets, and the implication was that distribution of cash or other entitlements would be the logical response.

It has taken the humanitarian system a quarter of a century to come to grips with this proposition. The notion of cash inputs instead of food aid is now receiving considerable attention.⁴³ The ALNAP dataset includes several papers that support the need for cash inputs rather than food aid. One evaluation in Ethiopia quotes research conducted by the Ethiopian Economic Association and the Ethiopian Economic Policy Research Institute of a Save the Children 'Cash for Relief' (CfR) programme to show that food bought with cash aid is 39 per cent cheaper than imported food and 34 per cent cheaper than grain purchased from national markets in Ethiopia. Moreover, the price at which an aid agency might buy grain on the local market is 7 per cent higher than the price paid by CfR beneficiaries (Brandstetter, 2004, pp 19–20). The same report finds that the pilot programmes were an 'unqualified success' (Brandstetter, 2004, p 22), and asserts that 'The evaluator knows of no other relief intervention that is more effective in both preserving and rebuilding assets than CfR'.

Another USAID study in Ethiopia (Gregg, 2004) focuses on distributing cash for seed, comparing this with distribution of seed, as in previous programmes.

It similarly concludes that 'cash infusions stimulate the local economy and bring poor farmers into it. Purchasing seed empowers the farmer and stimulates decision-making'. If cash inputs were used more widely it is possible that opposition to food aid might develop and the need to choose between accountability to donors and accountability to beneficiaries might fall directly on the implementing NGOs. An evaluation of cash-based programmes for Oxfam in Haiti found that 'The project beneficiaries were particularly opposed to the distribution of rice as part of the cash for work remuneration; they wanted to make their own financial decisions and decide what food variety to purchase' (Creti, 2005, p 4).

But is USAID concerned about 'accountability to beneficiaries'? This is by no means clear. The findings of the evaluations in Ethiopia are consistent with a wider review of 'Cash and vouchers in emergencies' by Paul Harvey for the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG). He concludes that 'the existing documentation of cash and voucher-based responses shows that they are overwhelmingly successful in terms of their impact' (Harvey, 2005, p 3), but

Given the arguments in favour of cash-based responses, why have agencies remained so reluctant to use them? The way in which the architecture of the humanitarian system is currently structured seems to inhibit consideration of cash and voucher responses. In the UN system, in particular the consolidated appeals, the almost complete absence of cash or voucher-based approaches suggests that cash is not seen as an option in part because the dominant operational agency is mandated to provide food. (Harvey, 2005, pp 3–4)

The food-aid lobby within the UN is powerful enough to 'distort' the entire humanitarian system. It has taken many years of research even to raise the question of food aid, and so far there has been little change in practice by donors. The UN is susceptible to financial pressures for accountability to donors and only weakly reflects the notion of accountability to beneficiaries. As in the case of food aid, donor interests easily become institutionalised. The UN General Assembly does little to represent the beneficiaries and so the tendency is for the aid architecture to represent powerful donor interests and specific interest groups rather than global 'need'. Change comes about painfully slowly, if at all.

2.3.3 A neglected issue: internally displaced persons

A similar imbalance may be noted between the attention given to refugees and the attention given to internally displaced persons (IDPs). Refugee rights have been clearly demarcated since the Refugee Convention of 1951 but IDPs were only recently brought under international protection through the 1998 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. A large and powerful UN agency is concerned with refugees, the High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), while IDPs are represented by an Internal Displacement Division (formerly Unit) managed by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA). Donors take a particularly close interest in refugees as potential asylum seekers, but, in terms of humanitarian need, IDPs are probably more important. Typically there are more than twice as many IDPs in the world as there are refugees (IFRC, 2005, pp 218–223). This imbalance, perpetuated in UN structures, causes perverse effects. The strong legal protection offered to refugees and the promise of humanitarian support from UNHCR sometimes draws IDPs across international borders to become refugees.

One of the most important reports in the ALNAP dataset considers the lessons to be learned from evaluations relating to IDPs (Borton et al, 2005). This is a synthesis of 11 main reports, supported by other studies and a process of interviews and discussions. It was commissioned as a joint evaluation by a group of donors and UN agencies. The synthesis report finds that although IDPs lack the clear protective force of international law, the Guiding Principles have now been widely adopted and have helped to improve the status of IDPs. There is an ongoing debate about the responsibility for IDPs within the UN system and there are still some unresolved issues, such as responsibility for camp management within the UN.

In recent years the tendency with regard to IDPs has been to avoid giving responsibility to a ‘lead agency’ such as UNHCR, but to rely instead on a ‘collaborative approach’ among UN agencies. This has not always been satisfactory. The UN Humanitarian Response Review finds that the attempt to work by ‘goodwill and consensus’ depends in practice on the skills and authority of the Resident Coordinator or Humanitarian Coordinator. It concludes that the quality of these coordinators is too varied and urges the development of a cadre with a higher level of authority and expertise (Adinolfi et al, 2005, p 11).

The IDP synthesis report cites a number of other reasons why the humanitarian system is not good at dealing with IDPs. Problems include ‘Lack of access, inadequate funding, difficulties in the identification of IDPs and their needs, and assistance not being sufficiently needs driven’ (Borton et al, 2005, p 14). In particular, this report describes the lack of needs assessment as ‘distinctly unimpressive’ and argues for ‘comprehensive, multi-sectoral, inter-agency assessments’ (Borton et al, 2005, p 16).

This is important because IDPs, along with refugees, are not necessarily needy. A major debate in relation to IDPs concerns whether they should be treated as a separate category at all. This arose because they were often poorly treated in relation to refugees, but the debate has created a new problem – the status of IDPs in relation to the general population. In the words of the synthesis report, ‘The evaluations revealed a strong vein of objections, not only to the treatment of IDPs as a separate category but even to their separate identification amongst all actual and potential vulnerable groups’ (Borton et al, 2005, p14).

The introduction of the Guiding Principles runs the risk of creating a special category of humanitarian aid that, as in the case of refugees, may ultimately lead to distortion in relation to needs. Unfortunately, the division of the UN into separate agencies tends to encourage the separation of populations into different groups (refugees, children, farmers, etc). This process could go on indefinitely, with new agencies being added to deal with each group. ECHO has already expressed fundamental opposition to treating IDPs as a separate category. This view is supported in several of the evaluations: ‘separate identification was at odds with needs-driven humanitarianism.... IDPs are better off than some other vulnerable groups, including those who did not leave their homes in the face of insecurity and threats to their protection’ (Borton et al, 2005, p14).

The synthesis report argues that the real focus of neglect is not IDPs but protection: ‘there is evidence of a continuing and substantial deficit in the protection work done by the international community’ (Borton et al, 2005, p 12). Even for refugees, the level of protection is too low, but the focus on refugees leaves other groups almost entirely neglected. The ALNAP *Review of Humanitarian Action 2004* described the Darfur emergency as a ‘crisis of protection’, expressing this at two levels: the failure of the international community to exert effective pressure on the government, and

Box 2.2 The protection deficit

Where national governments fail to protect IDPs, there is evidence of a continuing and substantial deficit in the protection work done by the international community. Practices and omissions contributing to this deficit include:

- Overlooking the protection needs of minorities
- The prioritisation of material assistance over protection needs
- The inability or unwillingness of implementing partners to engage in protection work
- European domestic asylum policy compromising in-country protection work
- Lack of access in areas of insecurity
- Lack of adequate monitoring of human rights abuses
- Conceptual confusion in donor organisations about their potential role in relation to protection
- Inadequate levels of funding being provided for protection activities in some cases.

Source Borton et al (2005) p 42.

the failure of operational agencies to protect the people of Darfur from violence (ALNAP, 2004). In response to increasing interest in this issue, ALNAP has published a guide on Protection for humanitarian agencies (Slim and Bonwick, 2005). But although protection is now much better recognised as an issue by humanitarian agencies, the international community has shown little vigour in implementation, especially in the case of IDPs.

The IDP synthesis report concludes that displacement should be ‘used as an indicator of potential vulnerability rather than as a means of defining target groups’ (Borton et al, 2005, p 45). The difference lies in vulnerability, rather than need. Or, arguably, need would be more usefully defined in terms of vulnerability.

The first principle of the Red Cross Code is that ‘need comes first’, but it is not clear to what extent this includes vulnerability. Long-term vulnerability is not addressed until the eighth principle where it is seen more as a consequence of disaster (‘future

vulnerability’) rather than a preceding condition (risk) or potentially the overwhelming issue during an ongoing disaster (protection), as in the case of Darfur. This may reflect an underlying assumption that states are responsible for security, while Western aid seeks to address physical needs. But such a model is not applicable in the case of fragile states, or where the state turns against its own people, as in Darfur.

It is becoming increasingly important to distinguish between vulnerability and needs. The reason why refugees were singled out for special attention was their vulnerability, but this has been transposed into a focus on their ‘needs’. A joint UNHCR/WHO evaluation of health programmes for Afghan refugees living in Pakistan finds that the level of services provided and general health status of the refugees is better than that of the host population. But instead of examining whether this is justified in relation to threats to their vulnerability, the report concludes that ‘This does not mean that UNHCR is aiming too high, only that the standards of the host country and that of Afghanistan are very low’ (Michael et al, 2003, p 25).

This is clearly an unrealistic argument. Donors are not going to raise standards across the whole of Pakistan and Afghanistan (and the rest of the world) in order to match the standards set for this group of refugees. The issue becomes even more complicated in relation to sub-groups of refugees. Among Afghan refugees in Pakistan there is a substantial discrepancy between those living in camps, who receive considerable support, and those living as best they can in urban areas with little support from donors: ‘For the latter, housing and living standards are often poor, if not appalling, and primary school attendance is rare – children commonly work as garbage collectors’ (Michael et al, 2003, p 25). A focus on protection would seek to ensure that such refugees could live normal lives free of violence, but a focus on ‘needs’ creates an incentive to live in camps.

The humanitarian system is geared to deal with categories of people. It focuses on people in camps and tends to neglect those who live in scattered host communities. It tends to favour refugees in relation to IDPs, and focuses on needs rather than vulnerability. Over the years, these distortions have become instituted in structures and ways of thinking. By taking the ‘camp’ situation as the norm, even the Sphere Technical Standards have tended to reinforce this tendency. Aid workers feel uncomfortable in situations where the Standards cannot be applied, even though this may include a very large part of the world. Institutional ways of thinking tend to avoid the difficult situations and issues.

2.3.4 Structural divisions: relief, recovery and reconstruction

As well as a tendency to focus on need rather than vulnerability, the ALNAP dataset also shows that the humanitarian system tends to allocate disproportionately large sums to relief and reconstruction rather than to recovery. In particular the system neglects the importance of livelihoods. This comes out particularly strongly in the TEC evaluations but is also supported by other findings. It reflects a more general tendency to focus on what can be supplied (relief items, houses) rather than what has to be supported through engagement.

It is perhaps interesting to note that ‘recovery’ is the only term in the sequence of humanitarian interventions (which may also include ‘rehabilitation’) that implies agency on the part of the affected people. ‘They’ have to recover, and define what that means, whereas ‘we’ provide relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction. No wonder, perhaps, that recovery is the Cinderella among phases of the response.

A long-term study of disasters in Mozambique (Wiles et al, 2005) for the World Bank and ProVention Consortium notes that the effects of this bias can be particularly acute where the overall level of funding is low. Donors have a tendency to focus on livelihood recovery only when sufficient funds happen to be carried through from the relief stage and become available for use in recovery, as in Mozambique after the spectacular and highly publicised floods of 2000.

The 2000 floods in Mozambique demonstrated clearly that it is possible to make an impact and carry out extensive recovery activities when the disaster is high profile and the amount of money donated to the affected populations is large. In lower profile emergencies, all the donated money is usually absorbed during the expensive relief period, leaving little room for maneuver in the recovery period. This was not the case in Mozambique where resources were pledged and continued to arrive over the two-year post-flood period. (Wiles et al, 2005, p 24)

A similar study of disasters in Bangladesh, also for the World Bank and ProVention Consortium, finds that, once the relief phase was over, donors immediately focused on the reconstruction of infrastructure – thereby omitting the recovery stage. Opportunities to link these projects with livelihood support were missed, leading to the conclusion that ‘the focus of major donors on infrastructure may be one of the

reasons why the understanding of, and attempts to build on, livelihoods after the floods was patchy' (Beck, 2005, p vi).

Lack of attention to recovery probably reflects lack of representation by 'beneficiaries'. The Bangladesh study indicates that, where they have the chance to express an opinion, beneficiaries emphasise the importance of livelihood recovery rather than relief or reconstruction. NGOs in Bangladesh are well aware of this and have become so well organised and articulate that they have been able to influence government to move from 'flood control', with the emphasis on physical barriers, to 'flood proofing', meaning rapid support for the livelihood strategies of the affected population.

NGOs are able to make use of their extensive savings and credit networks to provide short-term loans. But it is essential that these payments should be made immediately after the disaster, before markets and chains of supply have been irretrievably lost. It has been demonstrated that cash loans will be repaid even in the most difficult circumstances but donors have not yet grasped the point. Although donors provided some funds, they tended to dismiss this kind of activity as peripheral. The World Bank report cites a case in 2000 where an entire programme was undermined while the NGO waited months for approval from the donor who clearly had little idea of the importance of timing (Beck, 2005, p 20). Donors themselves remained focused on infrastructure, allocating what the NGOs considered to be disproportionate funding.

Ideally, all phases of the disaster response should be fully funded, but in practice massive spending by donors on relief and reconstruction reduces the funding available for livelihoods and leaves 'recovery' as the neglected part of the process. One of the main reasons for this may be the institutional divide between 'humanitarian' and 'development' sections within agencies, and the availability of different budgets. Underlying this may also be the tendency to prefer what donors can provide rather than what they can support in terms of local self-help.

An evaluation of the World Bank's general responses to natural disasters finds that the Bank's interventions have been conditioned, to some extent, by its mandate as a development organisation. It has tended, at least in some cases, to ignore disasters as an integral part of the development process and see them as extraneous events: 'Disaster is still sometimes treated as an interruption in development rather than as a risk to development' (IEG, 2006, p ix).

To some extent, the humanitarian system works in a symbiotic manner and the tendencies of donors can be counteracted by the tendencies of NGOs. If donors wish to spend their funds on relief and reconstruction, then public donations can be held back for recovery through NGOs. The system can be self-correcting through market forces. But the scale of resources available to NGOs without donor backing is small compared to what donors can provide. Public appeals are rare events – typically no more than one or two in a year. Even when they happen, there can be strong pressure to spend funds fast, meaning on relief. Despite massive public donations for the Tsunami Disaster, the TEC evaluations found that agencies had not adequately addressed the recovery phase. The problem is deeply embedded in the system, reflecting a tendency to do what is dictated by external pressures and institutional structures rather than what the affected people demand.

Many of these problems arise from drift in the system rather than any conscious intention. WFP has become powerful because there is a lot of money in food aid. The decision to create special rights for refugees was not meant to lead to the neglect of other vulnerable groups. Agencies do not deliberately ignore livelihoods and recovery. But lack of external challenge allows these trends to continue and consolidate. Evaluation sometimes raises questions, but in itself has too little influence to overcome the inertia of the system.

2.4 Local interests

2.4.1 Local political interests

Long-term humanitarian crises generate substantial vested interests both inside and outside the humanitarian sector, and the longer they last the more powerful these interests become. The evaluation of responses to the 2002–3 emergency in Ethiopia predicts that: ‘The emergency is not over for 7.8 million people who remain food insecure in 2004 and there is a high probability that more emergencies with increased frequency will occur, perhaps much larger than the 2002–3 emergency’ (Steering Committee, 2004). Food aid for Ethiopia has become institutionalised. But interests in this process are not limited only to the food-aid lobby.

Food aid for Ethiopia is an important source of income for trucking operations controlled by the dominant political party. Arguably, international responses to the food crisis affect the political balance of power. Cash distributions give more choice to local people and in a sense encourage a broader form of democracy, whereas food aid has a hierarchical quality, especially when delivered in trucks controlled by a political party.

Shifts in the way aid is delivered may give rise to new interests. A USAID evaluation of cash distributions in Ethiopia finds that a political economy may be developing around this newer approach:

The cash distribution for beneficiaries gave the tax collectors another opportunity to collect the land tax. The appropriateness of the government collecting taxes from the most vulnerable households who have just received allotments intended for the purchase of food and asset replenishment was an unresolved issue. (Brandstetter, 2004, p 20)

When a government decides whether or not to call for future assistance, factors such as income to the party through trucking and tax collected from cash distributions may be weighed up – but behind closed doors.

Evaluation rarely reaches deep enough to explore such processes. This has more often been left to academic research, which may produce results only years after the event. In his book *The Benefits of Famine*, published in 1994, David Keen showed how politicians and military leaders ruthlessly manipulated food aid during the Sudan war in the 1980s (Keen, 1994). By disrupting supply lines, merchants in collusion with politicians were able to create distress conditions that forced people to sell off cattle at deflated prices. Unfortunately, aid managers at the time were only hazily aware of this (Vaux, 2004, pp 69–92).

There is every reason to believe that such processes continue today and exert an influence, in various subtle ways, on humanitarian responses. Politicians in Sudan today benefit from the lucrative contracts for flights to Darfur and the rise in house rents in Khartoum. They have massive financial interests in the aid operations. These might even weaken their determination to end the war in Darfur. Evaluation tends to stop at the level of formal documentation and avoid such issues. But with increasing volumes of humanitarian aid, interests will increase. The need for parallel processes of research is also becoming greater.

2.4.2 Trends and personal preferences

The humanitarian system inevitably generates its own biases in the form of personal preferences. It suffers from the fads and fancies that pass through the system, creating ripples of distortion. Mostly these do little harm and could even be viewed as evidence of diversity and creativity. But sometimes they interact with deeper forces, and create serious rifts and risks.

Western aid inevitably reflects Western sentiment. The humanitarian system is particularly well geared to address the needs of children, with strong specialised agencies such as UNICEF and Save the Children. To an extent, the focus on children reflects a Western romantic view of innocence. Generous funding may be available for children while there may be suspicion about adults. Child sponsorship is a particularly successful fundraising mechanism but creates problems for aid managers who have to discriminate not only between children and adults but between sponsored and un-sponsored children. Humanitarian principle, notably the Red Cross Code, is clearly against such discrimination and most of the specialised agencies have long ago shifted their focus to children in the community rather than individual children.

The issue of focus on women is more complex, and even more susceptible to the personal interests of aid workers. An increasing proportion of women among aid workers has helped to focus attention on the importance of differentiation by gender in the analysis of needs. Equality for women, in the form of non-discrimination, is strongly endorsed by the Red Cross Code and Sphere, and supported by international law.

Problems arise when aid workers focus exclusively on women and put forward particular views about the status of women in society. The exclusive focus on women has been named the 'Women in Development' approach and was for some years a dominant trend in Western aid, with the spread of projects specifically for women in isolation from other needs and social linkages. There is now wider recognition that such projects should be integrated into a wider process of increasing women's representation.

Several evaluations in the ALNAP dataset make observations about the focus on women. A review of approaches to gender issues in Afghanistan warns that 'Our

experiences reveal that gender in Afghanistan translates, de facto, into women.... Women as a category are singled out in isolation from their wider social, cultural and family contexts' (Abirafeh, 2005, p 13). In the context of a Western invasion and the continuing Global War on Terror, focus on the status of women can easily be perceived as an attack on Islam. The report reflects this perception: 'Western-originated approaches... have more to do with international politics and agendas of external agencies than they do with meeting the felt and expressed needs of the majority of Afghan women' (Barakat and Wardell, 2004, p 19, cited in Abirafeh, 2005).

Another aspect of the tendency to focus on women and girls is the risk of neglecting men and boys. An evaluation of ECHO activity in Sri Lanka and the refugee camps in Tamil Nadu finds that the vulnerability of boys is neglected:

Returning [male] child soldiers are often severely traumatised and face considerable difficulties in reintegrating into society. In addition they have been recruited while they were still of school-going age. When they return they have missed essential years of schooling and training, and are unable to make up for them. (Herms et al, 2005, p 62)

The same report finds that very little attention is given to these young men, while by contrast attention is given to women and also to child soldiers because 'being a child soldier is also being a victim, and naturally deserving assistance'.

But the issue of boys who are sent away by their parents to avoid recruitment is relatively neglected. They miss out on education and are likely to end up in unemployment. They suffer from lack of self-esteem and this leads to widespread drug-taking. A man who has escaped fighting at the expense of education may then get married: 'to a girl that unlike him has been able to finish her schooling and training, and is therefore earning the family income'. Violence and aggression are common in such situations. The ECHO report also notes that, 'The children, especially the boys, eventually drop out and have a good chance to repeat their fathers' biographies' (Herms et al, 2005).

Girls are also drafted in to the fighting in Sri Lanka, and suffer serious consequences also, but boys are more likely to be sent away. After losing opportunities for education they suffer greater difficulties in performing the gender roles assigned to them, such as being 'head of the family' and 'breadwinner'. In this cultural context,

‘a real man has a job, and is not in charge of the household chores’ (Herms et al, 2005). Are such boys neglected because Western aid workers do not sympathise with the gender roles that have caused their predicament?

An evaluation of psychosocial responses after the Bam earthquake in Iran (Colliard, 2005, pp 43, 45, 48) also draws attention to the relative neglect of boys. Research showed that boys were more deeply hurt by their experiences than girls. They responded less well to the artistic and handicraft activities that were generally being provided than to sport. The report concludes that further efforts are necessary to understand the needs of boys and to devise responses that are sensitive to these needs.

There are, of course, valid reasons for focusing on women and girls. In most cases, their interests are poorly represented and need to be emphasised. They may be more vulnerable to security threats. But a Western concern for narrowing the gap between gender roles should not be transposed automatically into a focus on women and girls, especially in the current global context in which the West is often suspected of manipulating people and societies for its own ends. Above all, aid workers have to ask themselves whether they are addressing issues of humanitarian concern, or transposing their own concerns and perceptions onto another society. This is not easy.

2.5 Addressing the problems

2.5.1 Donors

During the 1980s it had been necessary to label humanitarian aid as impartial or neutral in order to gain access to areas under communist influence and to avoid potential confrontation. After the end of the Cold War humanitarian aid in Africa and Asia came under greater pressure from political and security interests. In the 1990s the UK government, for example, developed a policy of ‘coherent’ responses in which aid, foreign policy and military considerations were joined together in a

single strategy. This formed the basis for the 'Global Conflict Prevention Pool' in which the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development (DFID) share pooled resources and are encouraged to develop joint approaches (Harmer et al, 2004). A report in the ALNAP dataset on Finnish aid gives a good indication of the position of humanitarian aid in Western governance. It quotes official documents, asserting that 'humanitarian assistance... should be seen as an integral part of Finland's foreign policy, with definite linkages to the country's security policy, development aid policy and human rights policy' (Telford et al, 2005, p 14).

Both DFID and Finland are prominent members of the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative which, launched in June 2003, is intended to encourage a more collaborative approach among donors and a tighter focus on needs. It has adopted the principle of impartiality, defined as 'the implementation of actions solely on the basis of need, without any discrimination between or within affected populations.'¹⁴

The GHD initiative has been piloted in the DRC, where a set of indicators was developed to measure the application of the GHD principles, and it has also been evaluated in Burundi (Bijojote and Bugnion, 2004). The general conclusion is that progress has been distinctly limited. The Burundi evaluation finds that the objectives remained poorly understood, and there was very limited buy-in from the stakeholders. The evaluation of ECHO-financed programmes in Burundi comes to a similar conclusion. The GHD initiative has produced 'little discernible result so far in Burundi.... Donors appear to be too often designing their strategies in isolation of one another, which is leading to fragmentation and widely divergent application of policies' (Shepherd-Barron and Fadiga, 2005).

In practice the GHD initiative seems to represent good intentions rather than any actual change in donor practice. As the UN Humanitarian Response Review concludes:

The uneven support given to forgotten emergencies or neglected needs present the humanitarian organizations and the donors with the dilemma of the equity of their response. The steps taken in the framework of the GHD initiative are an attempt to address the dilemma but with an attitude, on the side of the donors, which remains too timid. (Adinolfi et al, 2005, p 59)

2.5.2 The United Nations

As noted above, the UN consists of a number of ad hoc structures that do not fit well together and often act as interest groups rather than a single structure. Accordingly the issue of coordination has been particularly thorny. The UN Humanitarian Response Review finds that coordination is poor between the three main levels of implementing agencies in the humanitarian system – UN, Red Cross movement and NGOs (Adinolfi et al, 2005, pp 10–11). This may reflect the trend among donors towards funding through bilateral rather than multilateral channels, and particularly through NGOs. The Tsunami Disaster showed NGOs for the first time in a position to dominate the UN, but unable to organise themselves into an effective coordination system (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006, Bennett et al, 2006).

The IDP synthesis report indicates that relations between donors and the UN have not improved. The donors ‘are not doing nearly enough to support coordination mechanisms whether for overall humanitarian efforts or those specifically relating to IDPs’ (Borton et al, 2005, p 17). Overall the trend seems to be towards more vigorous action by donors in pursuit of their security interests. This allows them to collaborate with each other but does little to encourage collaboration throughout the system. Since the UN is already a deeply fractured structure in relation to humanitarian action, it seems likely that opportunism rather than principle will prevail.

As the UN Humanitarian Response Review concludes:

Humanitarian organizations and donors acknowledge that the humanitarian response provided is not good enough, and that remedial action is needed and a number of initiatives are currently being taken to address this. Such initiatives focus on accountability to direct beneficiaries, donors and taxpayers, national or local authorities, as well as governing bodies of the humanitarian organizations. The major challenges are to reconcile different, if somewhat contradictory imperatives, to define the appropriate limits of accountability and to ensure that the accountability agenda is driven by the humanitarian principles and the needs of the beneficiaries. (Adinolfi et al, 2005, p 9)

2.5.3 Non-governmental organisations

From 2000 to 2004 NGOs produced a number of reports on the issue of ‘forgotten emergencies’ (Oxfam, 2000; 2003; Cosgrave, 2004; Christian Aid, 2004) but these were not followed up with campaigns, and more recently the NGOs have been silent on this topic. It has been argued that NGOs have now become fully integrated into a donor-driven humanitarian system that acts primarily in the interests of Western security (Duffield and Waddell, 2006). In such a system, distortions in relation to need are inevitable.

NGOs have also been criticised, notably in the TEC synthesis report (Telford and Cosgrave, 2006) for lack of engagement with the Western public over this issue. With some exceptions, they have made only half-hearted attempts to challenge the tendency to give money in response to images in the media rather than by considering a wider range of humanitarian need. NGOs could be accused of exploiting the ignorance of the Western public rather than making concerted efforts to bring about a better understanding and more rational choices.

Oxfam’s Peer Review after the Bangladesh floods indicates that NGOs rely on internal debate in order to curb such extremes (Oxfam Evaluation Team, 2005, p 22). Agencies that question themselves and learn from their experiences continue to move forward. But they are under no compunction to do this. The humanitarian system continues to demonstrate extremes of good and bad practice, and it is by no means clear that market forces favour good practice. This has led some commentators, including the authors of the TEC synthesis report, to call for more regulation.

A striking feature of the ALNAP dataset is that NGOs are clearly unwilling to publish their evaluations. The Sphere Common Standard on evaluation requires that: ‘There is a systematic and impartial examination of humanitarian action, intended to draw lessons to improve practice and policy and to enhance accountability’ (Sphere Project, 2004 p39).

Accountability, whether to donors or beneficiaries, must depend on transparency, which, in the case of evaluation, means publication.

2.5.4 The problem of needs

As this review has shown, the humanitarian system is driven by supply rather than demand. But there remains a further problem of defining what ‘demand’ really refers to. It cannot be simply a list of ‘wants’ but must refer to basic human requirements. But this is also hard to define. Current problems stem from the tendency to focus on immediate physical requirements as ‘needs’ and to demote vulnerability to a remote contingency. In reality, vulnerability refers to immediate threats to security and the collapse of the means of livelihood following a disaster. Agencies cannot retrospectively address the vulnerability that preceded a disaster, but they can focus on the vulnerability that follows.

In the Tsunami response, huge amounts of money were given to survivors but after the first few days there was no real threat to human life. People wanted to rebuild their lives or ‘build back better’ but they were not immediately vulnerable. The tragedy of the DRC was that its people remained vulnerable throughout the response, and therefore money would have saved lives. It follows that the focus of humanitarian action should be vulnerability, rather than need. Or, as Darcy and Hofmann conclude:

The concept of need as deficit, and consequent deficit-based analysis, reinforces the tendency to define need in terms of goods and services on offer, which people are found to lack. Instead of an analysis based on the ambiguous concept of need, the study recommends one based on acute risk, understood as the product of actual or imminent threats and vulnerabilities. (Darcy and Hofmann, 2003, p 5)

There are now serious attempts to reform the Consolidated Appeals Process. The UN is developing an index of humanitarian need. ECHO has already adopted the language of vulnerability and is using a Vulnerability Index to decide on the allocation of aid (ECHO, 2006). But it remains to be seen whether the humanitarian system will be able to agree on a common method of ‘needs assessment’.

2.5.5 Accountability to whom?

Another theme emerging from this review of evaluations is a persistent uncertainty about the relationship between ‘accountability to donors’ and ‘accountability to beneficiaries’. The Red Cross Code sidesteps the issue by putting both together, without acknowledging that the two forms of accountability can pull in different directions. Throughout this chapter there have been examples of conflicting forms of accountability, such as the contrasts between supply-driven and demand-driven responses. Evaluators often question ‘supply-’ or donor-driven responses and argue for greater priority to be given to ‘demand-’ or beneficiary-driven responses. In the evaluations comprising the ALNAP dataset, agencies are often urged to give greater attention to consultation and participation.

An emphasis on vulnerability could be integrated with a priority for demand-driven responses through the notion of ‘human security’. This was introduced in the UNDP *Human Development Report* of 1994 and further developed by the Commission on Human Security which defined human security, following Amartya Sen, as ‘freedom from fear’ and ‘freedom from want’ (Commission on Human Security, 2003, pp 8–9). Sen deliberately framed human security in terms of what people perceive, and emphasised the potential for ‘downside risk’, corresponding to ‘vulnerability’. The concern of outsiders should be that people do not lose what they already have, however meagre.

The concept of human security has the merit of uniting relief, development and conflict perspectives, and embracing both need and vulnerability. But it has the disadvantage that its subjective form makes it difficult to put into practice. The Commission on Human Security has translated ‘freedom from fear’ into ‘protection’ and ‘freedom from want’ into ‘empowerment’, but these are inexact equivalents.

Unfortunately the notion of human security has already been co-opted as a way of extending the language of global security to the local or ‘human’ level (Duffield and Waddell, 2006). But this does not mean that it can no longer be used in its original form. An index of human security might be preferable to an index of humanitarian ‘need’. But it may be even more important to find common ground.

2.6 Conclusions and ways forward

2.6.1 Summary of conclusions

Humanitarian aid may be the main focus for aid workers but it is not the centre of attention for most of the world. Political interest and public sentiment play a massive role in the allocation of aid. Aid is not directed where it is most needed. Where humanitarian action achieves a high profile, it is particularly susceptible to pressures that reduce the quality of the response. Especially in cases of conflict, humanitarian actors have not equipped themselves with the tools to analyse the context adequately, and remain susceptible to the political interests of donors and other parties.

Over the years the humanitarian system has developed structures that reflect sentiment and interest rather than need. It has also built an architecture of agencies that, especially in the case of the UN, divides problems and people in unsuitable ways. This not only confuses the response but also distorts it, notably towards food aid and refugees, and creates an inertia that makes change and adaptation difficult. The system is better at addressing the needs that it can fulfil than it is at assessing vulnerability. Consequently, it is poor at prevention and devotes most of its energy to problems that are already past. It draws staff from all over the world to address the aftermath of a Tsunami Disaster, when there are few lives to save, but neglects unnecessary deaths in their millions in DRC.

In disaster response, the humanitarian system still tends to favour relief and to neglect recovery, especially in relation to livelihoods. Donors in particular tend to jump from relief to physical reconstruction without supporting affected people in their attempts to earn their own living. This reflects a lack of responsiveness in the system to the demands of the affected people. Only rarely is their voice heard, often through local NGOs, but this is transposed into action only if they are powerful enough to wield an influence within the humanitarian system.

For the Red Cross movement and international NGOs, the Red Cross Code is the 'industry standard' but is being breached on a massive scale. Principle Four enjoins agencies not to act as instruments of government foreign policy. But since foreign policy is a fundamental element in the global allocation of aid, and NGOs depend heavily on institutional funding, humanitarian action follows politics. Principle One

of the Red Cross Code requires agencies to direct their attention to need above all other considerations, and this is endorsed by the Sphere Charter and Common Standards. But NGO responses are heavily skewed by public appeals. The pattern of humanitarian aid by NGOs across the world is much the same as for donors.

The consequences of imbalances in humanitarian aid are significant. In situations of high profile, such as the Tsunami Disaster, agencies become preoccupied with speed and focus on token successes rather than real needs. Staff and management capacity is drawn from other areas, and local capacity is bypassed. In the most neglected cases, such as in DRC, the result is unnecessary deaths, but to a limited extent agencies compensate by a closer relationship with local communities, leading to what may arguably be more sustainable solutions. In countries of dominant donor interest, such as Iraq, international NGOs have set a poor example to local NGOs, especially in relation to independence. As a result, NGOs and the Red Cross movement are increasingly perceived as a tool for the extension of Western interests.

At the local level, aid actors also tend to see themselves at the centre of the action, when in reality they may be tools of local interest. Sometimes they pursue their own interests and preferences, muddling rights with needs and overlooking vulnerable groups in the process.

Needs assessment remains the fundamental flaw of the humanitarian system. There is no accepted method of assessment. Comparisons are difficult and distortions become apparent only when they are absolutely glaring, as in the case of the neglect of DRC. UN Appeals are often used by donors as the basis for aid allocations but bear little relationship to need. Indeed, 'need' is often reduced to little more than a list of what the UN agencies can most easily provide. Vulnerability, particularly in the form of lack of protection against threats to security, has been seriously neglected. Vulnerability is a better basis for assessment than need, but the system is only just beginning to define this term and find ways to measure and respond to it. More comprehensive notions, such as human security, have yet to be developed and applied.

Efforts to address these issues are tentative and inadequate. Donors joining together in the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative have endorsed the principle of impartiality, and yet global allocations of aid continue to be seriously distorted and the initiative has had little impact on the ground. The 'Global War on Terror' has

introduced a new focus on global security that has trumped all other considerations. It remains to be seen whether donors can hold the line against such pressures. International NGOs and the Red Cross movement have yet to make any serious challenge to the distorted system in which they are embedded.

Structural problems will not be solved by collaboration but may need more vigorous forms of coordination. The problem is not specifically in the relationship between NGOs and donors, or between the UN and the Red Cross movement. It lies in the vigour of the top-down dynamic, driven by political and media interests. The answer is to strengthen bottom-up processes that provide better representation for beneficiaries. This can be done by vigorous assertion of humanitarian principle through designated leadership.

2.6.2 Ways forward for donors and the UN

The ALNAP dataset for 2005 offers an opportunity to examine humanitarian practice during the period when the Global War on Terror has reached its maturity and is seen competing with more classical humanitarian perspectives. The humanitarian system is shown to be swayed almost off its moorings by the influence not only of the global security agenda, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also by poorly informed and imbalanced responses by the Western public, as in the case of the Tsunami Disaster. There is no sign that such massive pressures are likely to abate. The humanitarian system is not strong enough to challenge the global security agenda. NGOs have shown little inclination to challenge the Western public. The immediate problem is how to minimise the damage.

The humanitarian system will be unable to cope with external threats so long as it remains divided and competitive. Efforts to promote more collaboration, such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative, must be applauded and supported. But the limited results so far suggest that this process will not go far enough to make a significant difference. Lack of impact on the ground indicates that the process is 'top down'.

The West's increasing willingness to intervene in other countries has led to a readiness to 'manage' conflict through aid interventions. In the case of Afghanistan, strategies for humanitarian aid are overtly developed through a security perspective.

Some elements within such a strategy will be valid in terms of humanitarian response, while others may be invalid. Disentangling the elements requires systematic analysis of the nature of the security threats and their roots in issues of humanitarian concern. Aid actors need their own forms of conflict analysis if they are to maintain their independence.

Further efforts must be made to counteract distortions in the global allocation of aid. If the UN Appeals are to be used as the basis for such allocations, they must be made systematic and objective. Work by the UN and ECHO to establish indices of humanitarian need should be examined carefully in order to reach a common agreed standard which can then be used as the prime basis for aid allocations, separating out the political and security interests. For the best representation of the security interests of ‘beneficiaries’, a human-security approach deserves consideration. Only when better assessment of need is available can there be a basis for accountability.

In disaster response, donors should focus more attention on the transition or recovery phase. This tends to be neglected for institutional reasons. In particular, recovery through livelihoods needs a higher level of funding and should be recognised at an early stage.

It may be unrealistic to suggest that the UN should dismantle its agencies and start all over again, but firm central control is needed in order to tackle the ‘box’ mentality that arises from such a system, and its inevitable tendency to follow vested interests. The limited success of the ‘collaborative approach’ of the UN in relation to IDPs indicates that collaboration without authority will lead to weakness, and this will leave the UN open to ‘distorting’ influences. A more vigorous style of leadership based on representation of humanitarian interests might be better for the system as a whole.

2.6.3 Ways forward for NGOs and the Red Cross movement

Codes and principles are an essential defence against distortion. The Red Cross Code and Sphere Common Standards are the nearest thing available to a statement of rights for beneficiaries. Sphere acknowledges that, although there are many different forms of accountability, ‘our fundamental accountability must be to those we seek to assist’ (Sphere Project, 2004, p 19). In current times this needs to be

actively asserted. Similarly, the first Red Cross Code principle, that need comes first, should be actively promoted. Agencies should tackle the distortions of the global humanitarian system in which they are embedded.

Box 2.3 Beneficiary surveys

In balancing ‘accountability to donors’ with ‘accountability to beneficiaries’, a key problem is finding out what beneficiaries think. Although public-opinion surveys are a basic tool in many other sectors, they are rare and under-developed in the humanitarian sector. One of the first evaluations to use large-scale beneficiary surveys was the DEC evaluation of the response to the Gujarat earthquake. A survey covering around 2,300 people conducted by a local organisation, the Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI), found that beneficiaries were more critical of the response than had been expected by the general evaluation team.

The process was repeated in the DEC evaluation of the response to the Tsunami Disaster in 2005, with surveys in India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia using local respondents. The comments from beneficiaries were again found to be quite critical and provided a useful check on the evaluation as a whole, which had otherwise relied heavily on inputs from the agencies themselves. In particular, the survey showed concern that livelihoods had been neglected and that the transition to recovery had been too slow. Similar surveys, with similar results, were conducted as part of the TEC Capacities and LRRD evaluations (Scheper et al, 2006), Christoplos, 2006). These surveys, nine months after the disaster, contrasted with surveys conducted by the Fritz Institute in May, just five months after the disaster, and helped to show that the transition from relief to recovery had not been properly handled. This suggests that beneficiary surveys are ideally conducted on a longitudinal basis, to map changes in public opinion over time.

The methodology for such surveys still needs to be developed. The DMI team has found that anecdotal information can be used in a creative way while remaining systematic. Cross-checking, triangulation and questioning within the survey team are important elements in the process. Surveys are an important step towards ‘accountability to beneficiaries’ but it is a poor reflection on the humanitarian system that they are so rarely used.

This should ideally be done jointly, but is this realistic? Although coordinating bodies have long existed, they have not been prominent in tackling major threats such as the Global War on Terror and distortion of the humanitarian system. The competitive behaviour that characterised the response to the Tsunami Disaster is not an encouraging sign. Freed of UN coordination, NGOs showed little inclination to coordinate or place the common good above their own interest. But perhaps the criticisms they have received from the TEC evaluations and elsewhere are just the jolt that is needed to bring about new forms of collaboration.

International NGOs and the Red Cross movement also faced strong criticism from the TEC evaluations for failing to establish adequate mechanisms for consulting, informing and involving the people affected by humanitarian disasters. With donors and the UN now rethinking the definition of ‘need’, these agencies have an important role to fulfil in representing beneficiary views. What really should be the concern of outsiders – need, vulnerability or human security? Perhaps a lead can be taken from beneficiary surveys (Box 2.3). These have provided important new perspectives on humanitarian responses and could be used to help form this definition. Once a global definition of need is available, NGOs should be able to hold donors to account, and strive to reverse the current polarity of power.

2.6.4 Summary of recommendations

Recommendations to donors and the UN

- Reinvigorate the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative, focusing on the issue of impartiality in global aid allocations and the challenge of establishing methods for measuring and comparing needs.
- Initiate processes of conflict analysis, especially where there may be a significant difference between approaches based on global security, state security and human security.

- Address the deficiencies of the Consolidated Appeals by establishing indices of need that take into account vulnerability and human security.
- Focus greater attention on the recovery phase of disaster response.
- Support collaborative approaches in the UN but do not ignore the need for dynamic leadership based on humanitarian principle.

Recommendations to NGOs and the Red Cross movement

- Use the principles of the Red Cross Code and Sphere to uphold humanitarian values in the face of distortions caused by political and media pressures.
- Engage with other actors to ensure that ‘need comes first’ can be translated into a way of measuring and comparing aid allocations.
- Develop mechanisms to ensure that ‘accountability to beneficiaries’ takes precedence over ‘accountability to donors’.
- Make use of beneficiary surveys to support and guide the activity outlined above.
- Make use of formal research in order to confront systemic failures in the humanitarian system.
- Engage with the Western public and media to promote better understanding of comparative need.
- Publish more evaluations.
- Promote internal accountability and debate through peer review.
- Focus on public audit as the primary method of downward accountability, and promote this method among donors and UN agencies.

Notes

The author was directly involved in some of the reports referred to in this chapter, including the DEC evaluations of responses to the Gujarat earthquake and the Indian Ocean Tsunami. He contributed to the TEC report on the impact of the international tsunami response on national and local capacities.

- 1 IFRC (1994): www.ifrc.org.
- 2 'NGOs' here includes the Red Cross, although there are no Red Cross reports in the dataset.
- 3 Public Service Agreement, p 19 – see DFID website: www.dfid.gov.uk.
- 4 For a detailed comparison of countries receiving more and less aid, see Development Initiatives (2005), p 22.
- 5 As an example: 'In Faridpur, sanitary napkins were not included in the package on the grounds that the donor did not allow for it. This gap could have been easily filled with Oxfam's own resources or we could have lobbied with the donor accordingly' (Oxfam Evaluation Team, 2005, p 15).
- 6 Personal communications.
- 7 International Rescue Committee survey data updated for *The Lancet*, 7 January 2006. See www.theirc.org/index.cfm/wwwID/2129.
- 8 Estimate by the author based on data from Development Initiatives (2005).
- 9 Total humanitarian assistance over the main period of insecurity, 1995–2004, was \$265m. Bosnia-Herzegovina received \$1,644m and Serbia/Kosovo \$1,299m (Development Initiatives, 2003, pp 32–33).
- 10 'A factor that has limited funding is the finite number of willing and able implementing partners and, in the past, limited humanitarian space' (Michael et al, 2004, p 20).
- 11 The only example is Currión (2005) which focuses on information technology and describes itself as an 'assessment'.
- 12 DFID has identified improvement of the CAP process as a target in its Public Service Agreement. It is also a focus for the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative.
- 13 Harvey (2005) provides a useful summary of the literature. See below for more on this.
- 14 See Harmer et al (2004) for a review of objectives and progress.

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Note

Some evaluations are listed by commissioning agency or by name of team leader, rather than including the full list of contributors, which may be extensive. In the lists above and below, names of team members are given where possible at the ends of the references.

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