

The Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI

‘If DFID takes the HERR on board, then the changes will be felt far beyond the sphere of UK-funded aid’

The UK’s review of humanitarian aid: an agenda for radical change?

Last year, the British government commissioned three independent reviews of its international assistance. Last week saw the release of the Humanitarian Emergency Response Review (HERR), looking at how the UK should respond to rapid-onset humanitarian emergencies. The document merits our attention, not only because it will help set the direction of one of the major, and most influential, aid donors, but also because of its implications for how we should all think about the humanitarian system.

The HERR gives a very frank diagnosis of the general health of humanitarian action today, taking on board some of the most radical thinking around. This makes for uncomfortable reading; the system isn’t working, despite efforts to reorganise it. International response ‘is all too often adding to the chaos, rather than alleviating it’ and ‘sweep[ing] aside local responders’. The HERR tells a simple and compelling story, but because it does not always lay out clearly the full implications of its analysis, the changes that it requires may not be fully recognised.

Early action

The HERR develops seven threads. The first is ‘anticipation’. Although almost all crises have predictable risk, and so can be prepared for, this doesn’t happen. The HERR calls for an emphasis on *early action*.

Most emergency financing is tied to humanitarian indicators, and so by definition cannot support early response or preventative action. Early action would involve responding using scenario predictions based on good risk analysis. Predicting crises is not simply the job of seismologists and meteorologists, but entails analysing vulnerability; understanding power relations and local institutions; analysing winners and losers of development policies; anticipating conflict; examining governance: in short, appreciating that disasters are creations of a political economy, not just natural hazards. This analysis needs to be in place before hazards occur.

This requires major changes in the way aid is organised and coordinated. New kinds of anal-

ysis will be needed before crises occur, early warning and assessments will need to change to meet the goal of early response; common response strategies will have to be determined, and agencies will have to derive their responses from these strategies; and, since predictions may be wrong, flexibility must be built into all responses. In short, taking this single thread seriously entails rethinking the whole organisation of humanitarian response. What the HERR proposes is in effect a rethinking of the entire disaster response system – or more than that, creating a system, bringing together the disparate actors currently working in isolation.

Resilience and innovation

Under two further threads (‘resilience’ and ‘innovation’), the HERR argues that current aid programming is inadequate. Despite its mandate to look only at rapid-onset disasters, the HERR recognises that separating humanitarian and development assistance is fundamentally incoherent. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have missed out a key target, it says, because making people more resilient, that is less vulnerable to disasters, must be a key priority of development assistance. Linking the MDGs with humanitarian assistance is genuinely ground-breaking, and involves far-reaching changes in staffing, organisational structure and resource flows. Meanwhile, under ‘innovation’ the HERR advocates for new forms of programming, not just technological fixes. The acknowledgement that our programming is not good enough is a difficult pill to swallow, but an important one. In order to be innovative, of course, people need time – time to think, to analyse, to learn and share ideas. Current paradigms in DFID stress reducing staff costs as a share of aid spend. Is this compatible with the HERR’s analysis?

Impact and accountability

Knowing whether innovation is successful entails understanding impact. The HERR is right to point out that humanitarian actors do not routinely assess this, so ‘it is almost impossible to say how the assistance helped people, or even

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whether it helped them'. Acknowledgement that we should all be accountable for impact is surely overdue. This should not just be about 'investing more in evaluation' or 'developing new tools for impact assessment' – though the HERR does its cause no favours when it focuses on this in its recommendations. Bringing impact assessment under the thread of accountability is a more profound shift. A focus on impact, rather than on outputs or activities, makes a project-eye view impossible. Humanitarian actors would be forced to consider their work within a common strategy, in the context of the system response as a whole. More importantly, they would also be forced to find out what people themselves are trying to do, and how aid projects really affect them. Changing this culture will involve another paradigm shift. What is the incentive for an agency to invest in impact assessment, if this has no effect on future funding? DFID will have to find ways to incentivise agencies to undertake reliable impact assessment. New funding relationships would inevitably be needed.

There are smaller clues too to just how much humanitarian actors will need to rethink their work if the HERR is taken seriously. If humanitarian action is indeed to 'support local institutions, rather than weaken them', then the humanitarian community needs to rethink more than just its skills base. The HERR calls for more in-depth analysis of risk, resilience and response, based on an understanding of social structures and processes, and of power. This is extremely difficult to do in a fly-in operation. The HERR implicitly demands that most humanitarian support be within a strategic response designed by people who understand the country through long-term engagement.

A transformative change?

The analytical part of the review concludes by putting the themes of accountability, resilience and the rest at the heart of a new policy, shaping the international system and changing the current funding models. However, while the analysis of the ills of the system is clear, the HERR leaves it to DFID to draw up the prescription to cure them. Such a road map is essential if DFID is to take on these enormous challenges, and to help those pushing for change in the humanitarian system. It would be a significant missed opportunity if engagement with the HERR were limited to ticking off the list of its specific recommendations. Some of these are critical ('incorporate resilience into DFID development policy and programmes', 'change the funding

model to achieve greater preparedness through more predictable and long-term funding'). Taken overall, however, the whole of the HERR is greater than the sum of its recommendations.

As it is the humanitarian system itself which is not fit for purpose, the whole architecture needs changing, including how the system relates to the governments of affected states and to affected populations. The HERR recognises that this is in part about human resources, and it includes a powerful comparison between the time that armed forces spend training (95%) and the time humanitarian agencies spend on training and preparation (the HERR estimates under 5%). These statements are hard-hitting, but again the full implications need considering. If 'the system' requires human resources of a different calibre, this has major financial implications. Currently, there is a quasi-market where NGOs offer their products and the donors choose, predominantly on the basis of price and quality. The kind of quality that the HERR says matters – quality of decision-making – is not on show in the market. The push for quality and investment in human resources will entail new ways of thinking about value for money which consider quality of impact. Achieving this without creating a small cartel of (Western) agency brands will be difficult.

Are we at the dawn of a new humanitarian era? The authors of the HERR clearly hope so, and if DFID takes their report on board then the changes will be felt far beyond the sphere of UK-funded aid. Can DFID deliver on the HERR? We will have to wait and see. One limitation is that the mandate of the HERR excluded protracted humanitarian crises, despite the fact that they account for more than 80% of humanitarian spending. The HERR does not say things which have never been said before, but the fact that this official review forces DFID to respond and explain how it intends to address these issues has the potential to bring radical change to humanitarian action, both in rapid-onset and protracted crises. DFID is a major humanitarian donor with influence that goes beyond its own funding. The HERR calls for DFID to continue to show leadership within partnership in an international world. The HERR may not say everything, but it provides DFID with an agenda for working with others to advance much-needed transformational change in the sector.

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DFID (2011) *Humanitarian Emergency Response Review*. London: DFID (www.dfid.gov.uk/emergency-response-review).