

Presentation Notes

The Humanitarian Response Index 2007: Measuring Commitment to Best Practice

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Introduction

As you are well aware, there has been a heated debate among development experts about the meagre results of half a century of rich-country development aid.

The economist William Easterly has noted that, notwithstanding vast sums spent on aid to the developing world and a long list of fashionable ideas as to what would work, the objective results achieved on the ground have been distressingly disappointing.

Fifty years after the first forays by development experts and international institutions into sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, the continent remains mired in poverty and lack of opportunity.

One increasingly important component of rich-country development aid is humanitarian aid, which targets persons affected by emergencies and natural disasters around the globe and plays a critical role in alleviating human suffering in times of stress and urgent need.

Whether because of climate change and its consequences, whether due to internal conflicts within states which the international community has failed to prevent or mitigate, whether because there is a growing consensus that this may be more efficient as a tool to alleviate human suffering, the fact is that the importance of humanitarian aid has been rising quickly in recent years, with its share in relation to total aid doubling between 2001 and 2006.

Economists do not generally have a good track record in making reliable forecasts and, as has been noted, I am an economist. But I feel entirely confident in predicting that I fully expect this ratio to rise quickly in coming years—the harsh facts of global warming, if nothing else, make this painfully and convincingly clear. And I believe this shift in the composition of aid to be a positive one.

The Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles

One key reason for seeing this in a favourable light is that, at least in this area, the international community is gradually getting its act together. The debate here has been pragmatic and focussed on how to enhance the efficiency of humanitarian actions, to make sure that scarce resources are used for maximum benefit.

A critically important step in this area was taken in 2003, when major donors endorsed the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) Initiative, a set of 23 principles which define the objectives of humanitarian action and spell out best practices. The GHD (as it is now called) establishes a clear behavioural benchmark for donors.

- The GHD Principles state that humanitarian actions should be based on the needs of the affected populations, regardless of political, economic, military or other “strategic” considerations, which have often hampered in the past the effectiveness of development aid and undermined public support for it.

- The Principles address key aspects of the relationship between donors and the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the three critical players in the delivery of humanitarian assistance.
- They explicitly support flexible funding arrangements that do not hamper the actions of those organizations on the ground delivering aid—such as through rigid earmarking of funds.
- They advocate that relief and development should be closely integrated to ensure that humanitarian interventions are sustainable after the immediate crisis is over. In other words, humanitarian assistance should not purely consist of charitable handouts, but should ideally set the stage for sustainable development.
- They require that donors respect the implementation of international humanitarian and refugee law and human rights.
- And they also call for “regular evaluations of international responses to humanitarian crises, including assessments of donor performance.”

Even with these laudable and practical principles as a guide, donors have been criticized for making decisions compromised by competing and sometimes inconsistent domestic and foreign policy considerations, for allocating funds inequitably, and for not responding to crises in a predictable and timely manner.

As with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other such worthy documents, capturing what Amartya Sen has called “heart warming sentiments”, very often the challenge is to narrow the gap

between the noble principles on the one hand and the realities on the ground on the other.

The Humanitarian Response Index

The Humanitarian Response Index (HRI) 2007 is a benchmarking tool for assessing how individual donors are performing relative to the commitments they have made under the GHD principles.

The Index provides an important platform for evaluating the quality of donors' humanitarian involvement over time in a consistent, transparent, internationally comparable manner.

The Index consists of 57 indicators, distributed over 5 broad categories capturing some important dimension of the principles. We call them pillars and they are:

- **Responding to humanitarian needs**
(Impartiality, distribution of funding relative to historical ties and geography, funding in cash, timely funding, funding to priority sectors,...)
- **Integrating relief and development**
(Consultation with beneficiaries on design and implementation,...)
- **Working with humanitarian partners**
(Funding to NGOs, Funding to UN Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeals, predictability of donor funding, funding to UN Coordination mechanisms,...)
- **Implementing international guiding principles**
(Implementing international humanitarian law, engagement in risk mitigation,...)
- **Promoting learning and accountability**
(Support to main accountability initiatives, number of evaluations,...)

A full listing of all the variables captured under each pillar and associated definitions are provided in Chapter 1 of the Report.

25 of these indicators contain hard data capturing some dimension of the Principles. The remaining 32 are based on the results of a Survey carried out in eight crisis countries in 2007, asking agencies that were actively working with donors and had received funding from them, a series of questions about how donors measured up in light of the Principles. 1000 responses.

The Index offers a treasure trove of information to assess donor strengths and weaknesses in delivering humanitarian aid and we hope that it will become a regular exercise for evaluating donor performance, as called for in the GHD principles.

HRI Results

The table on the screen shows the results of the Humanitarian Response Index for 2007.

Sweden is the best-ranking donor this year, occupying top place among 23 countries in 19 of the 57 indicators—a truly impressive performance. Indeed, the next best performer, Norway, occupies first place in 4 of the 57 indicators. Denmark, the Netherlands and the European Commission complete the first 5 places.

What makes Sweden exceptional?

Sweden:

- Provides most of its aid in cash
- Responds predictably and swiftly to complex emergencies

- Sweden's funding tends to be more focused than that of others on forgotten emergencies and on those sectors that receive low-profile media coverage
- Sweden works closely and effectively with its many partners, whether they be the United Nations agencies dealing with humanitarian assistance, civil society organizations, or the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
- Sweden has an excellent record in implementing international humanitarian law and human rights
- In short, Sweden is a model donor, as it has incorporated the GHD principles into the formulation of its own policies and everyday practices

One concern some donors had was whether our Index would penalize smaller countries with small aid budgets. Note, however, that:

- Ireland and New Zealand, two small countries were relatively strong contenders, placing 6th and 8th, respectively. The fact that they did so well in the rankings shows clearly that the HRI is able to distinguish aid efficiency from volume and that it does not unfairly penalize countries with small assistance operations.

(Show diamond diagrams). Full results provided in Report, which also has donor profiles.

Allow me to make three points to conclude.

- An important aim of this study is to assess donor countries on an *individual* basis. Too strong a focus on collective targets and assessments can, in our view, impede progress on implementing

the GHD commitments at the country operational level. A collective indicator (that applies to all countries as a group) may show improvement over time for the members of the group. But this could, for instance, reflect outstanding performance by a handful of countries and mediocre performance by the majority. A monitoring mechanism which is prone to what economists call “free-riding behavior” would not appear to be consistent with the spirit of Principle 22 which calls for “regular evaluations of international responses to humanitarian crises, including assessments of donor performance.” This study, therefore, unambiguously identifies itself with an interpretation of the Principles which is country-specific. (This may lead to creative tensions with donors who are never excited about being ranked. Authorities always feel that their country is above average).

- We would, of course, hope that donor countries will recognize value in the data delivered by the Survey and the hard data indicators. We also think that many of the civil society organizations involved in the delivery of humanitarian assistance will be natural allies of this framework. It goes without saying that we intend to improve it, both as regards its methodological underpinnings and public perceptions and understanding of it. In this respect the SG will know what is meant here by remembering the history of the UN’s Human Development Index and the iterations made to reach a finished product.
- Donor funding to mitigate the effects of natural disasters and man-made crises is expected to rise in coming years, both in absolute terms and in relation to overall development aid. It is likely that global warming—even assuming ambitious attempts on the part of the international community to deal with its effects—will deliver, regrettably, a steady stream of disasters which will necessitate fast, generous, and effective responses.

Now more than ever, it is essential for donors to improve the efficiency of their humanitarian actions as laid out in the GHD principles. The Humanitarian Response Index establishes a practical framework for assessing donor performance. It is not a “name and shame” exercise but, rather, is to serve as a tool to improve the quality of humanitarian action. We very much hope that, over time, it will be seen as an important contribution to this debate.