

# Bridging the humanitarian-development divide

Background Paper for the World Humanitarian Summit side event  
 “Making the SDGs work for Humanitarian Needs”

## 1. Introduction and background<sup>1</sup>

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) has twelve thematic networks that inform its work on support for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of these is on humanitarian-development linkages, recognising that the objective of eradicating extreme poverty and providing universal access to core services will mean working in contexts traditionally thought of as “humanitarian.” This network is co-hosted by Action Contre la Faim (ACF) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

Whilst there has been a long history of trying to connect humanitarian and development work, it has often proven challenging and largely ineffective.<sup>2</sup> The last few years have seen efforts redouble as the interconnected nature of climate change, state fragility, long-term humanitarian need, and protracted displacement have become obvious. This has led to a number of initiatives, many loosely grouped under the heading “resilience.” This short note sets out some of the basic issues ahead of the ACF/SDSN/NRC joint side event the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) on “Making the SDGs work for Humanitarian Needs.”

## 2. The problem

The humanitarian caseload is rising. There are more people displaced by conflict today than at any time since the Second World War. The war in Syria has reversed a trend toward less conflict-related deaths – they have been steeply on the rise since it started five years ago. The cost of natural hazard-related disasters is increasing dramatically, due in part to their increased frequency and severity. Droughts too appear to be increasing in frequency and duration and both of these natural hazard phenomena are potentially connected to climate change.

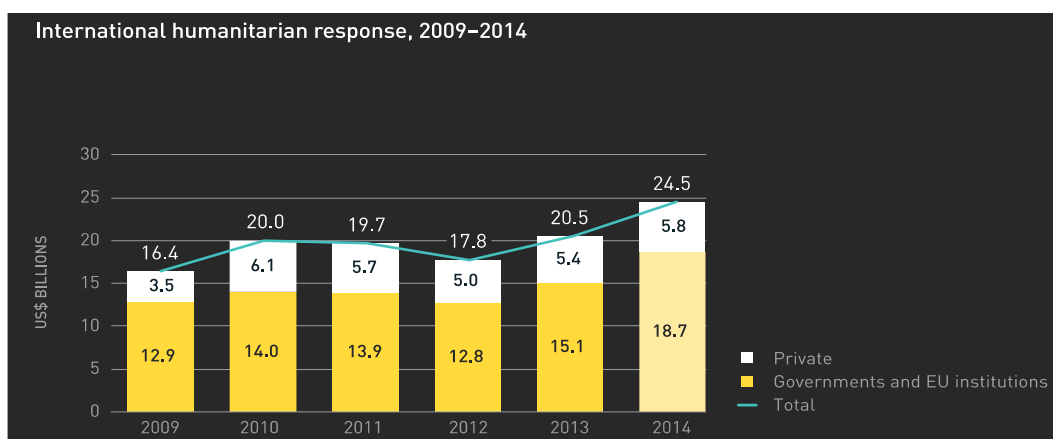


Figure 1: global humanitarian funding rising as a proxy for humanitarian caseload rising. Source: Global Humanitarian Assistance Report.

<sup>1</sup> Background note prepared by Lewis Sida and edited by Eve de la Mothe Karoubi (SDSN). For more information about the Humanitarian-Development Linkages Thematic Network, see: <http://unsdsn.org/what-we-do/thematic-networks/humanitarian-development-linkages/>

<sup>2</sup> This note is not the place to chart this history, but its origins date back to the late 1980s and have various been branded linking relief and development, the relief-development continuum, linking relief, reconstruction and development (LRRD) and ‘early recovery’.

Alongside these trends is a deeper problem; most of the ‘protracted’ humanitarian crises have not improved in the last twenty years, and many have deteriorated. Countries such as Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan have appealed for humanitarian funding every year since the current UN appeals system began over 20 years ago. The Ebola crisis in West Africa showed how countries characterised by weak institutions and a lack of resources remain highly vulnerable to shocks.

Long-, medium- and short-term recipients of official humanitarian assistance from DAC donors, 1990–2013

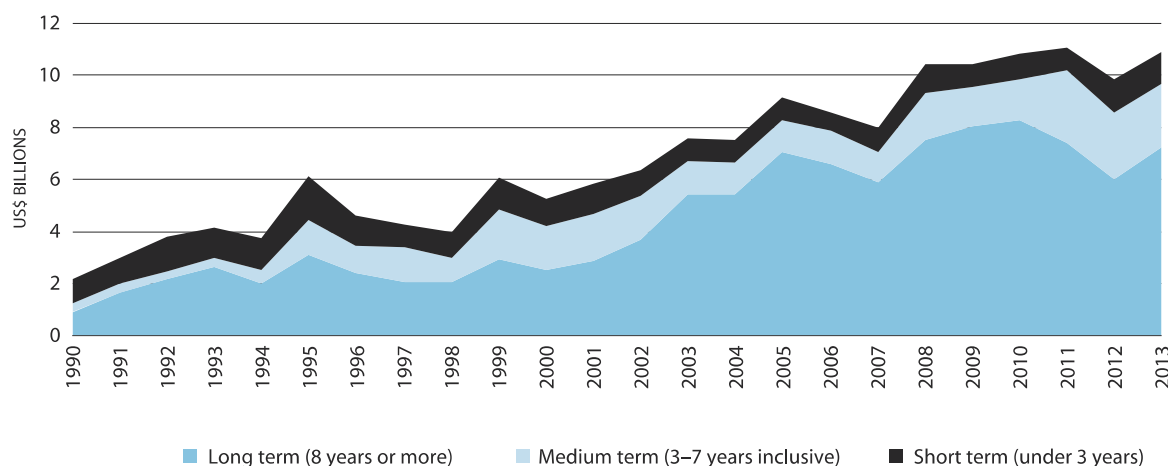


Figure 2: humanitarian appeals are mostly long term. Source: Global Humanitarian Assistance Report.

These are also the places where the extreme poor of the world are increasingly concentrated. A 2013 report from the ODI estimated that, “Up to 325 million extremely poor people will be living in the 49 most hazard-prone countries in 2030, the majority in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.” The OECD estimates that 43% of people living in extreme poverty currently reside in countries classified as fragile, and this is predicted to rise to 50% by 2030.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1 below shows the top ten recipients of ODA; the top ten humanitarian appeals and the countries with the largest number of people living under \$1.25 per day.

Net ODA	US\$ m	Humanitarian	US\$ m	Numbers in extreme poverty <sup>4</sup>	
Afghanistan	5,584	Syria (2)	1,885	India	296,873,256
Vietnam	4,138	OPT (10)	793	Nigeria	107,693,800
Egypt	3,616	Sudan (10)	736	China	84,971,872
Ethiopia	3,564	South Sudan (3)	664	Bangladesh	67,727,320
Syria	3,169	Jordan (1)	650	DRC	50,233,000
Turkey	3,132	Lebanon (4)	484	Indonesia	40,478,236
Tanzania	2,967	Somalia (8)	458	Ethiopia	34,519,668
Kenya	2,877	Ethiopia (10)	457	Pakistan	23,204,955
DRC	2,610	Afghanistan (10)	450	Tanzania	21,415,258
Pakistan	2,606	DRC (9)	449	Madagascar	20,098,216

Table 1: Top 10 countries – net ODA recipients (averaged over the last 3 years), humanitarian appeals in 2014 (number of times they have been in appeals in the last decade), and number of people living on less than \$1.25/day.

Many of the countries with the largest number of poor are also amongst the most disaster prone (such as India, China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Madagascar), or experiencing low-level

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2015), *States of Fragility 2015: Meeting Post-2015 Ambitions*, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264227699-en>

<sup>4</sup> Source is Max Roser, “Our World In Data”. <https://ourworldindata.org/world-poverty/>.

conflict (such as Nigeria and Pakistan), and countries like DRC and Ethiopia have had humanitarian appeals for decades.

In several countries, there are significant flows of both development aid and humanitarian assistance. DRC receives about 5 times as much development aid as humanitarian; Ethiopia and Afghanistan higher multiples.

### 3. How the World Humanitarian Summit and the SDGs

Both the problem analysis and the brief look at funding flows illustrate the growing convergence between the humanitarian and development agendas. If we are truly to “leave no-one behind,” then we will increasingly find development and humanitarian donors and agencies working in the same places with the same populations. Many do so already, and many donors and organisations do both types of work.

Currently, there are a number of areas in which this convergence is being actively promoted. Initiatives such as the solutions alliance for displacement, EU climate change-development-humanitarian projects in places like the Sahel, or efforts on fragility are just some examples.

But if poverty is increasingly concentrated in the most difficult places such as in areas of protracted humanitarian crises, then this is increasingly where SDG attention will be focused too. The humanitarian caseload will become of main concern to development.

Table 2 below shows the SDGs that have a clear reference to humanitarian concerns or disasters. Seven of the seventeen goals have clear and direct references, and in several other goal areas, it would be quite easy to make the link. Not only are the countries where humanitarian and development efforts are concentrated increasingly the same, but there are large parts of the global agendas that are similar. Although the WHS is yet to conclude, there are clear synergies in the proposed outcomes, both in terms of “leaving no one behind” and “working differently to end needs.”

What this suggests is that some of the SDGs are also the goals of humanitarians and that the efforts of both communities can be complimentary – both development and humanitarian actors can choose to prioritise certain issues in contexts where they have mutual concern. Malnutrition is a good example, where progress in humanitarian terms will also be progress in SDG terms.

Relevant Goal	Relevant Target
Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere	1.5 By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters
Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	2.1 By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round
	2.2 By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	3.3 By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases
	3.d Strengthen the capacity of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks
Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation
Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	11.5 By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations
Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*	13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries
Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere

**Table 2: Sustainable Development Goals and Targets of relevance to the humanitarian agenda**

First then, the SDGs provide a common framework for prioritising action. It is clear that, where people live in extreme poverty and hunger without basic services, these should be populations of concern to both development and humanitarian actors and that both have a role. This can be the basis of joint planning, or, at the very least, complimentary organization.

The SDGs also provide a clear platform for advocacy, both with national governments and with the international community. Achieving the SDGs will be a preoccupation of governments and donors alike and therefore are an entry point for humanitarian as well as development actors in addressing need and vulnerability.

The SDGs can also provide a valuable shared framework for data collection and monitoring, highlighting where gaps exist and therefore where urgent action is needed. Humanitarian agencies often have access to data that the development community do not have and vice versa. Combining these valuable insights can provide a better picture of where to prioritise resources and where certain modes of action are successful. By working better together, it will be possible to determine the best approaches and understand how to achieve maximum impact.

Clearly there will also be a need for blended finance if the SDGs are to be achieved in the most difficult places. Humanitarian finance is characterised by short-term grants, often leading to the curiosity of organisations working for a decade using rolling six-month grants. This hardly allows for the capacity to respond to shocks, never mind building resilience or reducing poverty. The recent UN High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing has made some important recommendations in this area, and a number of new financing mechanisms are being explored as a result. The so-called “grand bargain” recommends multi-year humanitarian financing as one of its core elements, as well as measures aimed at better data and transparency.

#### **4. Differences and difficulties in linking humanitarian and development work**

Although the overlap is not disputed, there are strong strands of opinion in both the development and the humanitarian communities that argue for keeping the two types of work separate. Often it is difficult for practitioners to distinguish what is important and genuine in these arguments, and what is more about history and institutional arrangements.

On the development side, humanitarians are sometimes viewed as ambulance chasers, rushing in without a great deal of knowledge, and offering only short-term, sometimes inappropriate, fixes. From this perspective, “development is the answer” – many less people die in earthquakes in Chile than Haiti thanks to development (not humanitarian aid).

For humanitarians, development is an inherently political process – at odds with the need to be impartial and neutral in conflict so that they can access all sides. From this perspective, handing over money to governments seen as corrupt or belligerent risks further harming the very people they are charged with protecting.

Of course there is merit in both perspectives, but it is equally the case that both only apply under certain circumstances. In a natural disaster, in a country with a well-functioning and legitimate government in power, humanitarian agencies should not undermine indigenous response by creating confusing parallel systems. In India, the government has all but banned foreign aid responders, as they are perceived to be costly and ineffective. Conversely, it is appropriate in Syria today to try and work on both sides of the lines, neither being directed by government or the rebels.

On the development side, the Chile argument makes sense, but what should be done in the meantime? Is it conscionable to let people die in a cholera outbreak in eastern Congo simply because the government should be leading the response? Or to tie funds up with government organisations that are incapable of responding, or worse? A more reasonable approach is to acknowledge that development and humanitarian action both have their parts to play in lifting millions out of extreme poverty, and that there is a need for rapid technical response capability in the meantime to stop people dying when things go wrong.

The Central African Republic (CAR) illustrates this dilemma in sharp focus. Most of the development indicators would qualify CAR for an emergency response. Infant mortality rates of 20% and above are the same as the accepted emergency ‘threshold’ for intervention of 2 deaths per 10,000 per day for under-5s. But humanitarian NGOs have neither the resources, nor the mandate to put emergency feeding centres across the country, especially now that the country has slipped into low-level ethnic conflict.

Development is clearly the answer in CAR, but development has to work alongside humanitarian action in CAR – keeping children alive today, as well as putting the systems and institutions in place for them to stay alive tomorrow. Humanitarian actors will at times need the space to go to places in the country that are off limits to the regular institutions of state – places under rebel control, or that are hostile politically to the government. It is not a question of either/or, but actually a question of both, working together in a way that plays to each other’s strengths, and dividing the labour.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The humanitarian-development divide has been the subject of ongoing debate for several decades. With the adoption of the SDGs, these two modes of aid are finding themselves likely to work in ever-greater proximity. For many, this is uncomfortable. The two modes of action have different institutional cultures and philosophical perspectives. Each has a critique of the other that makes collaboration challenging. Some of this is rhetorical laziness, some is competition for

funding, and some is quite genuine – reflecting a need in some cases to work differently on the ground.

For many years, it has been relatively easy for the two communities to work largely apart from each other. Development has largely focused on the more stable countries, with a greater chance of progress. Great advances in human development have been seen from China, to India, to Vietnam, and Ghana. But this has increasingly left a ‘rump’ of intractable poverty in difficult, unstable places.

For humanitarians, the converse is true. Many of the places where quick fix emergency action seemed appropriate have remained in crisis for decades. Places like Sudan and the DRC now consume the lion’s share of the annual global humanitarian budget. Some agencies, such as MSF, implicitly argue that resources tied up in effectively maintaining a global safety net of last resort have diminished the capacity for genuine response.

Whether this is true is moot; there is an interest from all sides in resolving protracted crises – both from a humanitarian and a development perspective. Clearly this is not easy, but countries like Ethiopia hold out some hope. Deaths from malnutrition have dropped over the years as the state has put in place capacity to manage this at the village level. The national safety net (PSNP) has arguably prevented many from failing into destitution. And in a severe El Nino year, with more people in receipt of humanitarian-type aid than ever before, the government is paying half the bill.

In protracted crises, government is both the problem and the solution. Development action often supports government, humanitarian action often bypasses government to directly support people in crisis. Combining these two modes intelligently – as has been done in Ethiopia – holds some prospect of tackling the worst and most difficult suffering. It is essential to achieving the SDGs, and to satisfying humanitarian principles that seek to alleviate suffering.