

Global welfare: dream or reality?

by John Mitchell and Hugo Slim

Jan Egeland, the former UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, has called for “a humanitarian system that is able to respond reliably, effectively and efficiently across the full range of emergencies ... humanitarian aid must be the responsibility of all nations for the benefit of all nations.”

Is the world on the verge of establishing a basic form of global welfare for all those affected by war and disaster? Or is the idea of fair and efficient global welfare a non-starter in a world of competing political powers, massive vested interests and imminent environmental crisis when group survival, not altruism, may become the norm?

How are we doing on reforming the politics and practice of humanitarian action? Nobody really knows for sure but an important indication is provided by evaluative material produced by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance. ALNAP is a membership organisation made up of UN, Red Cross/Crescent, government and NGOs, academic institutions and consultants and for the past five years ALNAP has reviewed a sample of agency evaluations in order to gauge the progress of humanitarian action.¹

Our latest Review of Humanitarian Action (RHA)² takes a step back and reviews progress since 2001. The RHA findings suggest that global welfare is still some way off.

Despite its extraordinary global reach, the formal humanitarian system is, essentially, the combined effort of about 20 western states which pay for and provide the agencies for most of the world’s humanitarian action. This is not a broadly-based international endeavour with buy-in from a majority of states. It is a western niche. Two of the five permanent members of the Security Council – Russia and China – are suspicious of the western system and prefer to do their own thing, or nothing, in war and disaster. The major Islamic states and charitable institutions prefer to work bilaterally and partially, mainly in particular Muslim settings. Local and informal systems – remittance flows and local civil society institutions – can be extremely important but are often overlooked by the western system.

Although it gets a lot of profile and works with the authority of the UN, the formal western-driven system can be a very blunt, selective and insensitive instrument. It has deep preferences for focusing on strategic wars and can be hugely skewed by populist passions – hence the massive inequality of response between suffering in the tsunami and

war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The system has no objective humanitarian measure of need and priority. Thus, the politics of the system remain deeply problematic.

So, too does agency practice. While there are many separate initiatives to try and make it perform better on the ground, there are still deep problems of good practice. Some sectors, like food aid, are over-subscribed while others, like shelter, water, camp management and protection, remain under-resourced or insufficiently understood. Complex cross-cutting areas like livelihoods and recovery remain confused.

Nor are the system and its many agencies a good learner. Today, there are more evaluations of humanitarian work than ever before but they are seldom well used. Either they are done ritually for donor accountability purposes or they are not user-friendly. Most do not employ an inspirational learning process as they go, nor are they designed to have their findings taken up by the key target groups who could bring about real change.

So, there are still real challenges. But there are also massive opportunities. The formal and informal systems are bigger and more self-aware than ever before. The ideal of eventual global welfare is an important long-term aim and could be voiced more explicitly by a range of social movements.

This year's RHA recommends that the system identify ten key objectives for humanitarian progress – some political and some practical – which can be agreed by everyone and monitored by an independent High Level Panel on Humanitarian Performance.

Then, in future, we might have a better idea of where we are going and how we are doing across the whole humanitarian system.

John Mitchell (j.mitchell@odi.org.uk) is the head of ALNAP www.odi.org.uk/alnap. Hugo Slim (slim@hdcentre.

org) is Chief Scholar at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue www.hdcentre.org in Geneva, Switzerland.

1. Our Evaluative Reports Database is at www.alnap.org/resources/erd/erd.htm
2. www.alnap.org/publications/rha.htm