

DRC: a donor perspective

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Donor engagement in DRC is more important than ever – but donors need to reassess their strategies.

Along with being one of Africa's long-standing chronic crises, the Democratic Republic of Congo is also the world's largest humanitarian response laboratory. The humanitarian reform agenda, launched in 2005 and piloted in DRC, set out to overhaul the provision of relief, by making humanitarian aid more accountable, predictable, better led, better coordinated and more responsive to identified needs. Since 2005, implementing these reforms in DRC has provided a unique opportunity to gain insight into what works, what does not and where challenges remain.

From 2005 to 2010, US\$2.5bn in humanitarian aid (including over \$400 million so far in 2010) has been provided by donors to humanitarian response in DRC. The sizeable increase in flow of financial resources (trebling from 2002 to 2006) has provided the necessary

fuel for new tools such as a common Pooled Fund,¹ Cluster coordination, a Humanitarian Action Plan and a strengthened Humanitarian Coordinator role to be introduced.

Perhaps one of the key early outcomes, in large part attributable to the Pooled Fund, is to have laid bare some of the frailties inherent in the humanitarian response system. Few of the systemic failures are new. Today's humanitarian collective is undermined by indecision, a lack of collective vision, and UN-NGO rivalry. It does not lend itself well to collaborative effort or accountability (either to donors or beneficiaries) or the ability to measure impact or value for money. Were we to reinvent the humanitarian system today it is doubtful that it would look anything like the system we have.

Although we cannot reinvent the entire humanitarian response

architecture, we can also no longer hide from the challenges it presents. In DRC, progress has been and is being made in the interest of better service delivery for beneficiaries; coordination platforms are paving the way for an open and productive dialogue to emerge among donors, UN agencies and NGOs. Spurred on by the pressures of the current financial crisis, it is accepted that a greater focus on tangible results and value for money is necessary and overdue. Technological progress – faster and better access to information – is helping to re-shape the way we manage our business. Despite this, progress is slow. Deep-rooted vested interests remain and therefore resistance to change is still present.

So what needs to happen?

Better needs assessment and response analysis: Easily said, harder to achieve – but progress is possible. Currently, the DRC Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP)² presents an overview of needs and

proposed response. The UN in DRC has led the way to make the HAP more strategic – less of a shopping basket of projects and more a collation of needs and priorities based on agreed indicators and thresholds. This process needs to continue and improve. More collaborative agreement is required to set thresholds and develop the most relevant indicators. This will also help tackle a critical deficit in the system: the lack of a cohesive opinion of what humanitarian assistance includes and where the limits of assistance are. Greater clarity is required of what Early Recovery in a humanitarian context covers, who is responsible and how it should be financed. This will also help donors in the allocation of resources.

Cluster coordination and leadership: An agreement is being reached in DRC to rewrite and redefine the role of Clusters. Donors are willing to support this process but have clearly stated that future funding support will depend on seeing results, and that there must be a clear demonstration of will from Cluster lead agencies to allocate resources and place coordination responsibilities at the core of their business. Agencies must safeguard against internal conflict between fundraising and programme delivery needs. We need clearer sector strategies, better indicators, more collaborative monitoring and evaluation, better assessment of partner capacities and an integrated process of learning and innovation. We have seen that with motivated and dedicated professional staff this is possible. Strong and effective Clusters will convince donors that the best use is being made of funds.

With regard to leadership, much of what has been achieved in DRC can be attributed to a strong Humanitarian Coordinator. Reviews³ have demonstrated that other countries have perhaps not been as fortunate. The selection – and training – of Humanitarian Coordinators with substantial humanitarian experience and leadership skills is essential for progress and innovation, and is critical to the quality of response in DRC.

Accountability, results and impact: The increased funding available in recent years has not been matched by a sense of collective accountability – either to donors or to beneficiaries. It is a stark reality that it is not possible to ascertain with any degree of certainty what \$2.5bn of relief aid has provided in DRC. The annual HAP cannot say how many people are being targeted. There is no collective review of the actions undertaken in a given year, and no serious monitoring and evaluation (M&E) process. This should no longer be acceptable.

The Pooled Fund has led the way in designing and developing an M&E system that captures results in a more cohesive manner than ever before. The results framework and reporting requirements are (quite rightly) applied equally to all implementing agencies (UN and NGOs). Even though the Pooled Fund only accounts for some 20% of the contributions to the HAP, this is no small achievement, and proves that collective reporting on results is possible. Technology exists to better capture information on results; what is required is political will on behalf of the UN agencies and NGOs to participate collaboratively in a collective effort. The UNICEF-sponsored 'Activity Info' database⁴ provides an operational platform which could be used by more partners to input data and thus help to link results to impact.

Donors are agreed in DRC that collective reporting is a good thing, regardless of where the funds come from. Getting an overview of what has been achieved is the starting point to determine what works and what does not and what will be needed in the future. Are beneficiaries receiving the aid they need – or only what agencies think they need? The move towards cash transfers and vouchers is a good example of a drive for innovation and proof that the humanitarian system can adapt and change.

Good Humanitarian Donorship
So what about the donors? The Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative⁵ has since 2003 established 23 principles which

36 member states (including the European Union) have signed up to. A success in itself, some may argue, but perhaps the time has come for donors to revisit the GHD principles. In DRC the GHD group aims to stimulate discussion around policy and strategy and promote a more coordinated donor approach. Perhaps GHD should now focus on agreeing an accountability pact with UN agencies and NGOs to deliver more and better for beneficiaries.

Donor capacity and engagement at country level are limited to a few large donors, and even this presence may be under threat as administrative costs for donor agencies come under increasing pressure. But the role of donors in influencing and providing technical input to in-country reform processes is critical in driving systemic improvements. More humanitarian expertise and engagement by donors will be required for progress to continue.

Now is certainly not the time for donors to throw their hands in the air in despair. It is time to continue and reinforce our engagement to make the changes and progress that are necessary for the many millions in Congo who rely on humanitarian aid. I am constantly impressed by the commitment and dedication of the large number of relief workers in DRC who constantly strive to make relief aid better. The DRC example proves that with time, effort and energy, important strides can be made. Improvements and innovation can and will occur.

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The opinions expressed in this article reflect the views of the author and not necessarily those of DFID.

1. Supported by Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the UK. In 2009, nine donors contributed a total of \$101mn.

2. <http://tinyurl.com/DRC-HAP2010>

3. Synthesis Report – Review of the engagement of NGOs with the Humanitarian reform Process. October 2009 <http://www.icva.ch/doc00003933.pdf>

4. Online system for tracking the results and activities of partner organisations.

5. <http://www.goodhumanitarianandonorship.org/>