IMPACT

The question of what longer-term impacts – positive and negative – humanitarian action has on the societies and economies in which it takes place is often not asked, and remains unanswered.

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Impact

In brief

The criterion of impact is perhaps one of the most important and least understood of any of the performance criteria considered here. For many years, academics and commentators have suggested that humanitarian action might, unintentionally, do more harm than good – particularly in situations of conflict (see for example de Waal, 1997; Terry, 2002). But there appears to be little hard data measuring the impact of humanitarian responses on wider populations or across time. Very few evaluations attempt to assess impact, although some include anecdotal information. The evaluations note this failure and blame it on the short funding cycles of humanitarian action, which prevent consistent longitudinal research (Clarke et al., 2015; IFRC and PRCS, 2016), and a lack of baseline data against which to measure progress (Adams et al., 2015; Darcy, 2016b; Duncalf et al., 2016). Similar points were made by a number of key informants. The literature review identified a number of research publications that considered the impact of humanitarian aid, but there were fewer of them than might have been expected. As a result, information on impact is scattered and largely anecdotal, and does not allow any overall conclusion to be drawn, either on performance or on trends related to this criterion.

To what degree does humanitarian action produce (intentionally or unintentionally) positive longer-term outcomes for the people and societies receiving support?

Key informants and interviewees discussed a number of related issues when considering the criterion of impact. The first of these was the immediate unintended effects of humanitarian programming. Interviewees from both national and international organisations suggested that humanitarian programming had had significant effects on the local economy beyond those planned for in programme objectives. As one explained, in the absence of government or private sector investment 'the local economy is really based on humanitarian money'. Humanitarian agencies provided employment for local people, and purchased local goods. Where these goods were purchased in significant quantities (for example, for relief deliveries) this could have a positive effect on local agricultural production, and on local markets (Ibrahim et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2016). By increasing demand for local produce, cash transfers had a similar effect (Drummod et al., 2015). Conversely, where large quantities of goods were brought in from elsewhere, as was the case in Haiti and Cameroon, interviewees discussed the negative effects on local production and markets.

> '[T]he local economy is really based on humanitarian money'
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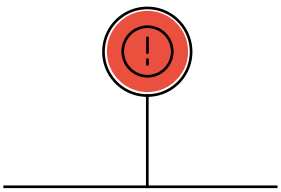
> NGO INTERVIEWEE



While there were a few positive effects of humanitarian assistance on community cohesion, the introduction of aid seemed more likely to have negative effects, particularly by exacerbating tension between those who receive assistance and those who do not.

A second immediate effect, more noted in evaluations than in interviews, was the potential for humanitarian aid to prevent recipients from resorting to coping strategies such as taking children out of school. This effect was noted for cash (as an unintended benefit (Drummod et al., 2015; Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017)) and for school feeding programmes (although in this case school attendance was part of the programme design (IFRC and KRCS, 2015)). An important point made by the evaluations was that, in order for programmes to address negative coping strategies, they need to be reliable: individuals and families need to know that the support they are receiving will arrive regularly, and for the whole period when assistance is required.

A number of evaluations also discussed the social and community effects of humanitarian assistance. While there were a few positive effects of humanitarian assistance on community cohesion (Girard, 2015; Stites and Bushby, 2017), the introduction of aid seemed more likely to have negative effects, particularly by exacerbating tension between those who receive assistance and those who do not (Blake and Pakula, 2016; Hidalgo et al., 2015). This effect was notable in refugee and displacement situations, where host populations felt discriminated against, and in situations where marginalised groups were excluded from assistance, or received assistance they could not use (Stites and Bushby, 2017). As with the immediate economic effects, the nature of the effect – positive or negative – appeared to owe much to the degree to which the potential impact had been considered in programme design.

Turning to the longer-term results of aid, we can distinguish a number of different types of effect. The first is best thought of as sustainability: the degree to which humanitarian operations continue to deliver benefits over time, after the projects themselves have closed. Again, the results are mixed. One long-term study of communities affected by the 2004 Tsunami, published in 2014 (and so just outside the time period of this report) found that the quality of housing, and satisfaction with health and education services, was better ten years after the humanitarian intervention than it had been beforehand (Lee et al., 2014). The study found that the receipt of humanitarian shelter and legal support seemed to predict positive long-term outcomes: those who had received shelter soon after the Tsunami consistently scored better on a number of indicators than those who had not. A World Vision report (World Vision International, 2014) on the Tsunami underscored the importance of shelter support for long-term recovery.

A different sustainability effect is noted in Oxfam research on community protection structures that the agency helped to initiate in DRC. The study found that the community groups were, in many cases, still active some years after the end of the programme: 'In a large number of cases, individuals reported that they "couldn't stop", often because the project had "opened their eyes"' (Oxfam, 2016: 15). Some structures became involved in activities that 'were not planned or supported as part of the original project but which could be described as broader community development activities' (ibid.: 8).

Another type of long-term effect occurs when the humanitarian system has provided a series of short-term interventions over a long period, and these have had an unintended, cumulative effect. There is for example some – limited but interesting – evidence that the cumulative effect of years of humanitarian support to healthcare systems has improved overall health status in Afghanistan (Asia Foundation, 2017).

A third type of long-term effect can result from intentional efforts to build people's resilience to future crises or – more generally – to support the development of people's livelihoods. As discussed in the section on connectednes, there are many questions over whether humanitarian programmes have been successful in insulating people against future shocks. With respect to activities aimed at developing livelihoods, or helping livelihoods to recover, interviewees gave a number of examples aimed at developing livelihoods, including training in book-keeping, provision of seeds and tools and education. However, the effectiveness of this type of work seems to be highly variable. In the Tsunami research mentioned above, a decade after the event family income was generally below pre-Tsunami levels, and where livelihood assistance was received in the year after the Tsunami, it 'significantly lowered the odds of a household attaining or surpassing its pre-tsunami monthly income' (Lee et al., 2014: 7). In other situations, however, some types of livelihood support have produced positive long-term effects (Stites and Bushby, 2017).

A surprising number of interviewees also spoke of the unintended dependency effect of humanitarian aid. Previous work on this topic (Harvey and Lind, 2005) has strongly suggested that individuals do not become dependent on humanitarian assistance, but interviewees from national NGOs, international organisations and local authorities disagreed. In Mali, DRC and Côte d'Ivoire, in particular, aid recipients were perceived to have become used to receiving support, and unwilling to take initiatives to support themselves. Interviewees also felt that government structures had, in some cases, been disempowered by long-term humanitarian interventions: 'we've contributed, in part, to the state of the country. Because we're pretty much creating a parallel system … They don't have any accountability to improve their systems and their mechanisms' (see also Lawday et al., 2016). A related concern was that humanitarian action had had negative effects on social structures and mechanisms for redistribution and social support.

Impact in refugee contexts

The concern that humanitarian aid could lead to tension between social groups has been particularly acute in refugee contexts – particularly in the Middle East – over the past three years. The challenge here has been that humanitarians have provided assistance and protection to refugees, while not extending support to the (often impoverished) communities to which the refugees have fled. This concern has led to an increased focus on community cohesion as an objective in humanitarian work with refugees in the area (see for example Aiken and Dewast, 2015; Church World Service, 2016; Garcia et al., 2015; Turnbull, 2015).

A small number of key informants raised a different concern around the humanitarian response to refugees in Europe: the way in which, by emphasising the needs (rather than the capacities) of refugees and migrants, humanitarian agencies may have contributed to a negative framing of the Migration 'Crisis' in the media. This is a specific, and important, example of a more general question around the impact of the humanitarian system: what are the unintended consequences of communications which often focus on need and vulnerability?

Impact in situations of conflict

Some of the longer-term results of aid in situations of conflict have been considered by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC). This longitudinal research aimed to understand the contribution of donor-supported activities to the long-term livelihood trajectories of people affected by conflict. While the focus was not exclusively on humanitarian activities, the research suggests that humanitarian actors' attempts to achieve a positive impact in terms of recovery have been extremely limited. Most humanitarian cash transfers are too small, and of too limited duration, to make any significant difference to people's livelihoods in the longer term. Similarly, one-off distributions of seeds and tools seem to have very limited impact, and are often undertaken without an understanding of local conditions of land ownership and labour relations or the availability of other inputs. While in some contexts (DRC, South Sudan and Pakistan) local groups that engage in longer-term activities have had some impact on livelihoods, this seems to be the exception, not the rule, in conflict and post-conflict environments (Maxwell et al., 2015; Stites and Bushby, 2017).

The evidence available on the impact of aid on conflicts in the period 2015–17, however, is far from conclusive. Given the importance of human life and dignity to the humanitarian enterprise, this is a surprising omission.

The SLRC's work is unusual in considering the potential for positive impact. As noted above, a more general concern of researchers and practitioners is the possibility that humanitarian action might make conflict worse, or prolong it. Several key informants discussed this theme, suggesting that humanitarian action could have the effect of extending conflict by substituting for political solutions or preventing a swift military conclusion. This was a theme echoed in the literature: one article used a statistical model to demonstrate that humanitarian aid has had the effect of prolonging conflict (Narang, 2015). In other circumstances, humanitarian aid may provide disproportionate advantage to one side in a conflict, and so potentially tilt the balance of hostilities. Martinez et al. (2016: 167) argue that this has happened in Syria, where 'the provision of emergency food aid in Syria by the international humanitarian community has unintentionally assisted the Assad regime … international food aid has allowed the government to continue welfare support for the civilian population while reducing government expenditure on food distribution, thus freeing up additional resources for the war effort and simultaneously assuaging popular discontent that could easily turn to unrest'. More immediately, the literature provides examples where the provision of aid has made civilians more vulnerable to attack (Stites and Bushby, 2017; Wood and Sullivan, 2015). The evidence available on the impact of aid on conflicts in the period 2015–17, however, is far from conclusive. Given the importance of human life and dignity to the humanitarian enterprise, this is a surprising omission, and one that will hopefully be addressed before the next edition of *The State of the Humanitarian System* is written in 2021.