

**BRIEFING PAPER THREE**

**GOOD HUMANITARIAN  
ACTION IS  
CONSISTENT  
WITH LONGER  
TERM POLITICAL,  
ECONOMIC AND  
SOCIAL PROCESSES**





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**Suggested citation**

Obrecht, A. and Knox Clarke, P. (2015) *Good humanitarian action is consistent with longer term political, economic and social processes*. Global Forum Briefing Papers. London: ALNAP/ODI.

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ISBN 978-1-910454-22-0

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# Acknowledgements

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Many thanks to Urveshi Aneja, Francesca Bonino, Richard Garfield, Simon Levine, Luz Saavedra, Abby Stoddard and the WHS Secretariat for discussion and comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

# The Global Forum Briefing Papers: What are they for and what do they tell us?

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The aim of the Global Forum is to identify recommendations that will help the international system become more adaptable to different crisis contexts, thereby making overall humanitarian action more effective. To support these discussions, these Background Papers:

- Outline how the international system is performing against various criteria of effective humanitarian action
- Identify the key obstacles to improvement on each criterion of effective action
- Present the recommendations that have been put forward around the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) process to address these obstacles

Each paper's title describes a **success criterion** for humanitarian action. These are different ideas of what effective humanitarian action looks like. The seven success criteria were identified through a two-stage review of the evaluative research on humanitarian performance and the recommendations put forward for the World Humanitarian Summit process (for more detail, please see the accompanying paper: 'The Global Forum Briefing Papers: What are they for and what do they tell us?').

## WHAT IS THIS SUCCESS CRITERION ABOUT? WHY DOES IT MATTER?

These sections give a brief description of the success criterion and the different views on why this is important for good humanitarian action.

## HOW WELL DOES HUMANITARIAN ACTION PERFORM AGAINST THIS SUCCESS CRITERION?

This section provides an overview of what is going well and what is not with respect to each success criterion. It draws on evidence to identify the degree to which the criterion is being met in current humanitarian action. The primary source of evidence for this section in each paper is the 2015 State of the Humanitarian System

(SOHS) report, and it should be assumed that this is the key reference unless cited otherwise. This section also introduces the key obstacles to improvement, which are bolded in the text. These key obstacles are also derived from the 2015 SOHS, as well as from other research and evaluation on humanitarian action.

## KEY OBSTACLES

This section is a summary list of the key obstacles described in each paper as inhibiting better performance against the criterion.

## KEY OBSTACLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides a list of the recommendations which seek to address the key obstacles and so to improve humanitarian action with respect to each success criterion. These recommendations have been synthesised from over 700 recommendations across 39 position papers, WHS consultation reports and the work of the WHS Thematic Teams (see 'The Global Forum Briefing Papers: What are they for and what do they tell us?' for more detail). They reflect the different recommendation areas external organisations have put forward and have been clustered according to the obstacles they seek to address. The aim of the synthesis is to accurately reflect the range of views and ideas for reform, and to connect these ideas to an evidence base on how the humanitarian system is performing. This means some synthesised recommendations may conflict with one another, or may not be mutually achievable, as there remains a lack of consensus among humanitarian actors on how best to improve humanitarian action.

## ANNEXES

The annex to each paper (provided in a single-bound document to Global Forum participants) provides the full set of raw recommendations used in the synthesis, showing where these recommendations were clustered.

# GOOD HUMANITARIAN ACTION IS CONSISTENT WITH LONGER- TERM POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROCESSES

## 1. WHAT IS THIS SUCCESS CRITERION ABOUT?

- The relationship between humanitarian action and longer-term political, economic and development processes, and the need to establish the most effective link between humanitarian action and longer-term processes
- In particular, the relationship between humanitarian and development activities, and also
- The relationship between humanitarian activities and political processes of conflict prevention and resolution
- This characteristic touches on the relationship between international humanitarian actors and governments: however, this topic is dealt with in more depth in Paper 4
- Similarly, while the topic of humanitarian engagement with longer-term processes often involves questions around humanitarian principles, the issue of humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law (IHL) is the focus of Paper 5

## 2. WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Intervening in the underlying issues that lead to humanitarian crises – be they poverty, marginalisation or political instability – can arguably prevent the need to respond in the long term. As such, longer-term interventions of this nature can ultimately increase the dignity and self-sufficiency of vulnerable people and decrease suffering. By reducing the need for humanitarian response, this form of intervention can also, arguably, reduce the costs associated with response.

Humanitarian aid cannot successfully address these problems, but it can be designed and implemented in such a way as not to make them worse, or to contribute, in a small way, to their resolution. However, in order to connect humanitarian activities with these longer-term political and economic processes, it is generally necessary to work closely with states and with other political actors. It may also require investment of humanitarian budgets, not on the basis of present need but in ways that contribute to alleviating needs at a later date.

As such, some humanitarians see the idea of making humanitarian aid consistent with longer-term processes as a threat to good humanitarian action, because it can lead to compromises on the humanitarian principles, particularly principles of independence and of the provision of assistance on the basis of current, demonstrated need.

We can say, then, that this issue matters to some people because it is central to making humanitarian aid more effective. It matters to others because it represents a significant threat to humanitarian action. And it matters to all humanitarians because it is a focus of debate, which does not appear to be close to resolution. The attitude that an actor or individual takes towards this issue is generally shaped by what they view as the primary function or purpose of humanitarian action. The issue here is not only how humanitarian action should interact with longer-term processes but also how much it should interact, and whether it should do so at all.

**There is significant disagreement within the humanitarian community as to the degree to which linking to longer term processes is a legitimate humanitarian activity.**

**Difficulties exist over establishing entry and exit strategies.**

### **3. HOW WELL DOES HUMANITARIAN ACTION PERFORM AGAINST THIS SUCCESS CRITERION?**

The issue of consistency between humanitarian activities and longer-term processes arises in a variety of different contexts in humanitarian action. Humanitarian and development activities have traditionally overlapped ‘before’ and ‘after’ crises (and particularly rapid-onset crises), in areas such as disaster risk reduction (DRR) and rehabilitation. However, there can also be confusions and overlaps during humanitarian operations. In many recurrent or protracted crises, humanitarian responses appear to have replaced and even disrupted more fundamental developmental action (by, for example, using short-term approaches such as food aid to deal with the symptoms of recurrent droughts; or by providing basic social services, such as education, for years on end in chronic crises).

Similarly, humanitarian action has arguably been used as a ‘sticking plaster,’ replacing political action in complex emergencies and allowing the international community to remain involved in situations where more profound political engagement is not working or is politically undesirable. In urban environments, humanitarian action (particularly around shelter and settlement and the free provision of goods and services) has had long-term, unintended impacts on livelihoods and development.

These challenges are not new for humanitarians: in terms of the relationship between humanitarian and development activities, there have been long-standing discussions and activities aimed at linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD) and addressing the ‘relief to development continuum’. In the past five years, there has been an increased interest in resilience activities – action that (according to the US Agency for International Development (USAID) definition) promotes ‘the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth’.<sup>1</sup> Humanitarians have worked to try and identify how their activities in preparedness, risk reduction, response and rehabilitation might form part of broader resilience programming.

In general, research for the 2015 State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) report found humanitarian action was weaker in linking to longer-term processes than it was on most other criteria of effectiveness. An initial obstacle to meeting this success criterion is that **there is significant disagreement within the humanitarian community as to what this criterion means and the degree to which linking to longer-term programming is a legitimate humanitarian activity.**

There may be no right answer here: the 'best' fit between humanitarian and other, related activities may depend on the context. It is also important to note that, while these disagreements prevent consensus, they are not paralysing humanitarian action: different organisations simply decide where they stand on the issue and develop programmes accordingly.

Fundamentally, this obstacle is based on a lack of consensus over what should be the scope and limits of humanitarian activity. A similar problem occurs in 'chronic' situations where disease morbidity and mortality are at, or near, 'crisis' levels but there is no clear initiating crisis. This can often be the case in protracted emergencies and in urban areas. This leads to **difficulties over establishing entry and exit strategies:** when should humanitarians become involved? And when, and how, should they cease activities, or hand over to development actors?

In terms of linking humanitarian to developmental activities, progress had been limited. In the response to Typhoon Haiyan, and in other countries affected by rapid-onset natural disasters, there was confusion over when to move into a recovery phase, and only limited success in linking the response to DRR and resilience activities. With respect to recurrent crises, a recent survey exercise in Mali<sup>ii</sup> found that aid actors felt limited progress had been made in the area of 'establishing joint humanitarian and development mechanisms to address common challenges'. Overall, the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) stakeholder consultation for Eastern and Southern Africa suggested only 20% of humanitarian programmes made communities prepared to face similar events in the future,<sup>iii</sup> while in the stakeholder consultation for North and Southeast Asia, only 18% of respondents consistently considered disaster risk in their programming.<sup>iv</sup> Some progress has been made in linking humanitarian work to resilience with the UN's Sahel regional resilience strategy. SOHS

interviewees saw the adapted humanitarian appeal instrument for the Sahel as a modest step forward because of its longer timeframe (three years rather than the standard one year) and its integration of resilience and long-term activities. However, establishing practical links between the humanitarian response and the more structural development/resilience work has proved challenging.

Turning to humanitarian engagement with political and peace-building processes, successful alignment of humanitarian activities with longer-term processes also seems hard to achieve. Overall, the SOHS 2015 found **humanitarian advocacy efforts around conflict to be limited in scope and poorly coordinated.** In addition, effectiveness in advocacy was hampered by the lack of clear targets and coherence in strategy. Small-scale and late efforts to mobilise greater action around South Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) did not succeed in mobilising a sufficient international response to the unfolding crises there. And, although the Syria case saw success in the passing of UN Security Council Resolutions endorsing cross-border relief operations, there has been little meaningful impact on the protection of Syrian civilians or expanding their access to humanitarian aid, much less in prodding political actors to make progress towards a ceasefire.

In areas of protracted conflicts, increased attention is being given to the relationship between humanitarian and peace-building actors and to the relative roles of these actors and potential for them to work together. At the same time, a number of interviews for the 2015 SOHS raised concerns about the relationship between humanitarians and peacekeeping forces in the field, noting in particular a lack of strategic priority and independence afforded to humanitarian action in situations where the Humanitarian Coordinator/Resident Coordinator was also the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG) of a UN peacekeeping mission.

One area where humanitarian activities are increasingly linking effectively with longer-term activities is that of disaster preparedness, where the humanitarian system's performance has been improving consistently for several years. The bulk of these improvements have occurred in middle-income countries affected by periodic natural disasters (such as Indonesia and the Philippines). In the Philippines, the 2015 SOHS field study found preparedness investments in advance of

**There are technical and knowledge constraints to long-term engagement, particularly a lack of skills and tried and tested programmes.**

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**There are financial constraints to making humanitarian action consistent with development or political processes.**

Typhoon Haiyan, including early warning measures and government evacuations, according to a UN official, ‘saved hundreds, if not thousands of lives’. Less progress has been made, however, in countries experiencing protracted crises. It is perhaps not surprising that humanitarians should be more effective in preparedness work than in resilience or peace-building. Of the various areas that relate to longer-term processes, preparedness is where the humanitarian system’s technical capacities are strongest and where there is a clear, shared understanding of the goals, as well as some progress on how to measure performance.

What, then, are the obstacles to making humanitarian action more consistent with longer-term programming?

There are also very real **financial constraints** to making humanitarian action consistent with development or political processes. Funding for emergency preparedness, DRR and reconstruction is an ongoing challenge, and humanitarian actors find themselves continually having to prioritise life-saving activities and forego preparedness and capacity-building initiatives.<sup>v</sup> WHS stakeholders consulted in the North and Southeast Asia region suggested lack of funding was the main constraint to implementation of DRR activities.

In addition, there are **technical and knowledge constraints** to this type of engagement. Many humanitarian organisations lack skills in development action, and in political economics. Partially as a result of this, there are only a few ‘tried and tested’ programming options around resilience activities or conflict alleviation. Humanitarian actors will also, often, lack an understanding of the **existing capacities and plans of local, national and international actors** working in the development or conflict arenas.

The lack of knowledge reflects a broader problem of **limited relationships with development and political actors**. We consider the problem of limited relationships with governments further in Paper 4, but it is also worth noting here. The SOHS field studies and evaluations review found humanitarian actors were not strategically



engaged at higher levels, and had generally weak linkages and dialogue with governments, development and political actors. As highlighted at the Disaster Response Dialogue Global Conference in Manila in October 2014, humanitarians often attempt to establish relationships with key national and local actors at the onset of a crisis, rather than in advance, making it difficult to build trust.<sup>vi</sup>

At the same time, **some governments are not paying sufficient attention to the issue of disaster risk**, making it impossible for humanitarians to articulate their programming with a national plan. In the consultations for the WHS North and Southeast Asia region, stakeholders were clear that national governments held primary responsibility for reducing vulnerability and managing risk in their countries, and governments' inability to prioritise DRR and enforce relevant laws and regulations was a significant cause of increased disaster risk in the region.<sup>vii</sup> More broadly, **where political and development actors do not work effectively, humanitarian action can end up as a last – and unsuccessful – resort.**

## Humanitarian actors have only limited relationships with development and political actors.

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## 4. KEY OBSTACLES

1

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There is significant disagreement within the humanitarian community as to the degree to which linking to longer-term processes is a legitimate humanitarian activity.

2

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Difficulties exist over establishing entry and exit strategies.

3

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Humanitarian advocacy efforts, particularly around conflict, are limited in scope and poorly coordinated.

4

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There are financial constraints to making humanitarian action consistent with development or political processes.

5

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There are technical and knowledge constraints to long-term engagement, particularly a lack of skills and tried and tested programmes.

**6**

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Humanitarian actors lack an understanding of the existing capacities and plans of local, national and international actors.

**7**

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Humanitarian actors have only limited relationships with development and political actors.

**8**

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Governments are not paying sufficient attention to the issue of disaster risk.

**9**

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Where political and development actors do not work effectively, humanitarian action can end up as a last – and unsuccessful – resort.

# 5. KEY OBSTACLES AND SYNTHESISED RECOMMENDATIONS

The WHS Thematic Teams' Bonn recommendations reflect the most recent thinking of the WHS Secretariat and Thematic Teams on the key areas for reform to be addressed by the Summit. These recommendations are italicised below.

1

## KEY OBSTACLES

*There is significant disagreement within the humanitarian community as to the degree to which this is a legitimate humanitarian activity.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Clarify the limits of humanitarian action managed in a secure manner.

2

## KEY OBSTACLES

*Difficulties exist over establishing entry and exit strategies.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Establish 'triggers' for starting and ending the relief phase.
- b. Establish handover strategies and responsibilities in advance.
- c. Make humanitarian response more sustainable in crises that will be protracted: plan for the long term from the beginning.

3

## KEY OBSTACLES

*Humanitarian advocacy efforts, particularly around conflict, are limited in scope and poorly coordinated.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Humanitarian actors should play a more assertive role in demanding consideration of the needs of crisis-affected populations by other actors.

## 4

**KEY OBSTACLES**

**There are financial constraints to making humanitarian action consistent with development or political processes.**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- a. Agree on basic crisis cover for the bottom billion, whether in the form of insurance, safety nets or other assistance.
- b. In situations of protracted crisis there is a need for multi-year and multi-polar finance.
- c. For natural disasters, there should be a target to reduce the overall contribution from international humanitarian finance, with a shift to development and risk financing.
- d. Create targets to increase humanitarian or development finance for preparedness.
- e. Engage the private sector.
- f. Donors should restructure to bring humanitarian and development work closer together.

## 5

**KEY OBSTACLES**

**There are technical and knowledge constraints to long-term engagement, particularly a lack of skills and tried and tested programmes.**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- a. Bring in technical expertise from other sectors to improve the shift to recovery.
- b. Prioritise the identification of 'what works'.
- c. Develop new programme approaches, particularly for urban, nutrition and displacement situations.
- d. Humanitarian actors should expand their work on education as a critical sector for providing the link between relief and longer-term recovery and development.

## 6

**KEY OBSTACLES**

**Humanitarian actors lack an understanding of the existing capacities and plans of local, national and international actors.**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- a. Conduct common assessments that consider existing capacities.
- b. Conduct assessments in collaboration with development and peace-building actors.

# 7

## KEY OBSTACLES

**Humanitarian actors have only limited relationships with development and political actors.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. *Agree on a compact between humanitarian and development actors that will herald a new system of collective crisis management. This is aimed at reducing the overall humanitarian caseload in protracted and recurrent crises.*
- b. *Multi-risk analyses should be done systematically at the local, national, regional and global levels, kept updated, rooted in scientific (physical, natural and social sciences) and local knowledge and shared in a transparent and open manner.*
- c. *Cross-programming for determining longer-term crisis drivers and ways to mitigate them are needed. New risks are emerging (natural dynamics and scale) and require permanent surveillance and a high level of alertness at all levels.*
- d. *Create response plans jointly with governments and development actors.*
- e. *Ensure humanitarian effectiveness indicators include mention of recovery and DRR: link to DRR global agreements.*
- f. *Change the structures of international agencies to bridge the divide between relief and development.*
- g. *Review relationships between humanitarian action and peacekeeping and produce/update guidelines.*

## 8

**KEY OBSTACLES**

**Governments are not paying sufficient attention to the issue of disaster risk.**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- a. Governments should integrate disaster risk and response concerns into legal and policy frameworks.
- b. Governments should increase investment in building resilience.

## 9

**KEY OBSTACLES**

**Where political and development actors do not work effectively, humanitarian action can end up as a last – and unsuccessful – resort.**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- a. Clearly separate humanitarian from political activities.
- b. Advocate that political actors commit to addressing political problems – particularly those of conflict or potential conflict, protracted displacement and protection.
- c. Ensure political actors/mediators consult humanitarian actors.
- d. *Address the institutional barriers at the local, national and global levels that hinder the inclusion of risk analysis in aid programming, taking into account trans-boundary dynamics and their global impacts.*

## 4. ENDNOTES

- i. USAID (US Agency for International Development) (2012) 'Building Resilience to Recurrent Crisis'. USAID Policy and Programme Guidance, Washington, DC: USAID. A variety of other, related definitions have been proposed, including the UK Department for International Development's (DFID's) 'Disaster Resilience is the ability of countries, communities and households to manage change, by maintaining or transforming living standards in the face of shocks or stresses – such as earthquakes, drought or violent conflict – without compromising their long-term prospects': DFID (Department for International Development) (2011) 'Defining Disaster Resilience'. DFID Approach Paper. London: DFID.
- ii. In early 2014, Dahlia conducted a Humanitarian Track 5 (HT5) exercise in Mali, where it analysed the recommendations from six humanitarian evaluation reports, surveyed 80 persons and interviewed 24 actors to gather their views on how much progress had been made against five key recommendations (Dahlia, 2014).
- iii. 16% of respondents said humanitarian assistance received during an emergency made the community more prepared to face similar events 'to some extent'. 4% said it did so 'to a great extent'. In addition, 25% said it did so 'to a limited extent'. WHS (2014) 'Regional Consultation for Eastern and Southern Africa. Preparatory Stakeholder Consultation'. World Humanitarian Summit (WHS).
- iv. WHS (2014) 'Regional Consultation for North and South-East Asia. Preparatory Stakeholder Consultation'. World Humanitarian Summit (WHS).
- v. See Kellet, J. and Peters, K. (2014) 'Dare to Prepare: Taking Risk Seriously'. London: ODI.



- vi. IFRC (2014a) 'Disaster Response Dialogue Global Conference in Manila. Improving trust and cooperation for more effective humanitarian responses'. Manila: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
- vii. WHS (2014) 'Regional Consultation for North and South-East Asia. Preparatory Stakeholder Consultation'. World Humanitarian Summit (WHS).







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