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How to Bridge the Gap: From a Focused Humanitarian Action to a Broad and Sustainable Cooperation

Nowadays, one of the major challenge facing the humanitarian aid community is how to successfully link relief operations with rehabilitation and long-term development. In other words, when does assistance leave the place to partnership, local capacity enhancement and developmental cooperation? One of the major goals of disaster management, and one of its strongest links with development, is the promotion of sustainable livelihoods and their protection and recovery during disasters and emergencies.

Humanitarian action “prime movements” is to save lives, to ensure survival by all means with the underlying imperative of “do no harm”. However, in this phase of operations it is crucial to have a long-term perspective at the early stage in order to ensure a sustainable cooperation focused more on local capacities and partnerships rather than assistance. Planning for rehabilitation and development must start simultaneously and often choosing the right balance between relief and developmental activities is difficult in a context of competing priorities and scarce resources. The concept of linking relief to rehabilitation, reconstruction and development is one of culture to be addressed across all sectors. The focused humanitarian action of the early phase of a disaster response must take into account as much as possible the local capacity and integrate the beneficiaries in the decision-process whenever possible. This would ensure a proper anchorage of the action into the local context and ensure sustainability and eventually lead to cooperation between partners at long-term. The matter is complex since there are many issues to tackle, e.g. in emergency action relief goods and services are provided free of charge, while for actions of development a financial share is generally requested from concerned population. The challenge is thus how to pass from free goods and free services system to a cost-recovery system?

In the case of complex emergencies the challenge is even harder to assume.

This is particularly evident in countries affected by protracted crises. The perception of a linear “continuum” between relief, rehabilitation and development has left place to the idea of “contiguum” reflecting more the reality on the field. Indeed, relief, rehabilitation and recovery are not steps of a linear process. In several countries affected by chronic emergencies there are

some areas in complex emergencies while other are relatively peaceful and undergoing development.

In situations of dependence of the beneficiaries due to protracted crises in which the social structure has been deeply disrupted it is particularly difficult to find an approach that would lead to sustainable cooperation.

There is no one-fix solution since every humanitarian crises is different by its context, the framework of interventions of all actors. However, some guiding principles have emerged along the on-going debate on the subject:

First of all, it requires strengthened coordination among all actors involved in humanitarian action, among donor agencies.

Emergency preparedness is certainly one of the best tool to ensure sustainable cooperation. By addressing the health sector it is a good way to reinforce a smooth link between relief, rehabilitation and development.

Within each organization it is important to integrate personnel dealing with humanitarian action together with people dealing more with cooperation and long-term development. Too much partition should be avoided. This is actually a fact in these days where UN agencies and NGOs dealing with humanitarian relief integrate as well cooperation development.

However, the logic of management is quite different between humanitarian aid and long-term cooperation. Decision-makers are national authorities in the context of development, while in humanitarian action success depends very much on the rapidity of intervention, and is generally conducted without debate (participation) of displaced population, refugees or local population residing in the area of temporary accommodation.

Also, efforts are needed from the donor community to ensure that no resources gap would weaken the transitional period between relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development.

In summary, the gap between humanitarian relief and a broad and sustainable cooperation is the subject of many debates among humanitarian and development actors. This new paradigm is now full part of the culture of professionals dealing with humanitarian aid and development cooperation and as such is integrated in training and educational matters provided by concerned organizations.

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