

Humanitarian Aid Boiled Down

Humanitarian aid is usually composed of two completely different types of work. Humanitarian relief and humanitarian development. Relief is short-term (think food drops, digging people out after earthquakes, refugee camps, clinics in war-zones). Development is longer-term and happens in places where people tend to be economically disadvantaged but aren't suffering from a war or other disaster (think education in Benin or micro-finance initiatives in Azerbaijan).

But people aren't normally interested in the humanitarian aid until there is a disaster on the news and they want to help out. So, we are going to just talk about relief work here. Who does relief work? Well, there are humanitarian aid organizations, there are churches/mosques/etc., there are well-meaning individuals/organizations, there are governments, there are businesses, there are the Red Crosses, and there is the UN. That's it.

Who are all these people? They can all be broadly divided into two categories. The donors and the doers. Let's start with the easy one. The donors. The US government gives billions of dollars a year in aid to other countries. How do they do this? Various ways but some goes through an agency of the state department called USAID. This money is supposed to be given from 'the American people' (ie. your tax dollars) to people in other countries who need disaster help. Of course, USAID can't keep 300 people on standby in case there is a disaster so they act as a donor and give the money to organizations, both local and international, who have better capacity, knowledge, people to do the work of delivering aid, managing camps, digging people out, etc. Nearly every government works this way. The British government's agency is called DFID, EU's is ECHO, etc. Businesses - especially big businesses are also starting to give large amounts of money to organizations who are better placed and can assist those in need. Well-meaning individuals - everyone from Aunt Mabel in Kentucky to Bill Gates can give money for assistance to be given. Sometimes these people are wealthy enough to set up trust or foundations which give large grants.

The doers tend to be humanitarian aid organizations for the most part, along with well-meaning individuals and churches/mosques/etc. Most of these usually have some sort of tax-exempt status, are non-profits, and can receive donations. They might call themselves NGOs (non-governmental organizations). This can mean different things so you have to look carefully into what each NGO is actually doing. NGOs can be big or small. They might be religiously affiliated or they might be completely secular. They might take money from governments or they might only take money from individuals. They can be very diverse and work in lots of different sectors or they can be very specific about what they do and how they do it. (Some large NGOs that work in disasters are: Doctors without Borders, Oxfam, Save the Children, MercyCorps, International Rescue Committee, and World Vision but there are tons of middle-sized and small NGOs that are equally as good). Each NGO has a little different *raison d'être*.

One might provide medical care only. Another might specialize in providing food. Another might be an expert in refugee camp management.

In disasters, life becomes very basic people need food, water, clothing, health care, housing, and protection from abuse. (One could argue that they need things like education and counseling but we're talking very basics here). This is what the staff of NGOs do. They are trained and have experience in providing these things for large amounts of people in disaster settings. Well-meaning people who travel in to 'help' might have certain experiences that help but they usually can't bring to bear the resources that NGOs can in the quantity or with the quality required. NGOs always have to work with the host government no matter how awful that government is - otherwise they don't get in (which is what is happening in Burma at the moment).

Now for the more complicated two. The Red Cross and the UN. The Red Cross is actually a federation of individual red crosses/red crescent in each country. They act autonomously so in any disaster there might be the Spanish Red Cross, the American Red Cross, and the Sudanese Red Crescent all working. The Red Cross is the only organization with a 'mandate' for existing. This was given in the 1949 Geneva Conventions. The entire Red Cross family (ICRC + country Red Crosses) operate autonomously and therefore are different from donors and NGOs.

The UN is made up of several different organizations and only some of them work in disasters. It is incredibly complicated but to boil it down it is usually - the World Food Programme, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNAIDS, UNEP, UNFAO. They tend to act as donors but in-country rather than from afar. Meaning, WFP will get the food into the country but then give it to the NGOs to do the actual food distribution.

So who checks up on all of this? That's an excellent question. No one. NGOs haven't existed in their current form for very long and, despite being a conduit for billions of dollars of aid a year, it is still the world's largest unregulated industry. Anyone can start an NGO. You don't have to be certified, have a diploma, or even be sane. Bigger donors, such as governments, have very specific rules about who they give their money to and how they evaluate the work that is being done but that's not to stop anyone who doesn't take government money from doing whatever they heck they want.

So how do you know which humanitarian aid organizations are good and which ones you can trust? That is up to you. You have to do some research. Some things to look for are: Are they part of accountability organizations that give a stamp of approval such as the Humanitarian Accountability Project, or People in Aid? Do they follow commonly accepted principles such as The Sphere Standards and the Red Cross Code of Conduct? How much of every dollar donated is spent on overheads and how much makes it to the people in need? Do they have regular monitoring and evaluations of their programmes? If so, could you read one of their reports? If you hate the American government you might not want to give it to an organization that takes USG funding. If you think the UN is misspending money then you might not want to give to UNICEF...cause they ARE the UN. If you think that the people who work on the front-

lines in disasters should speak out about what they see then the Red Cross is not for you. They do not engage in advocacy in order to maintain strict neutrality. Whatever you do do not just give to the guy who comes on television and asks for money!

We all like to think that humanitarian aid organizations are filled with wonderful people doing good work - and for the most part they are - but you need to be responsible to ensure that your dollars are doing the most good that they can and that they aren't being fraudulently misspent. The best way to do this is to start now. Do some research and find your favorite group. It probably wouldn't kill you to even give to them when there isn't a disaster as they are likely continuing to do work in forgotten wars and disasters - like Congo, South Sudan, Uganda, and Sri Lanka when no one is paying any attention - and this will help ensure that they are still working when you want to give to a big disaster like the most recent ones in China or Burma.

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