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CO-ORDINATION OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
IN REFUGEE WORK

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This essay concerning the co-ordination of non-government agencies follows on from an earlier study that documented the general lack of co-ordination in bilateral and multilateral donor-funded projects and the adverse impact this had on the institutions of developing nations. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are defined as non-profit organizations, both religious and secular, whose primary goal has historically been to alleviate human misery in developing nations.

It might reasonably be argued that since the vast majority of refugee assistance is financed by donors, co-ordination problems associated with refugee work are derivative and will continue until donors co-ordinate their work. Speaking more broadly, this line of reasoning would suggest that co-ordination problems can be expected in the work of all donor agents (profit-making organizations, universities, voluntary agencies, and so on), in all fields of foreign aid activities (projects, disaster assistance, humanitarian activities and so forth), until donors adopt effective remedies. Put another way, so long as donors aim primarily at disbursing monies in accordance with their own bureaucratic and political imperatives, with little regard to the action of others, donor agents can be expected to behave similarly.

This position questions the need for a specific review of the co-

in these circumstances. Finally, few countries are structured institutionally to deal with refugee problems. This means there is frequently no indigenous body with the mandate, the legitimacy, or the capability to co-ordinate the foreign and national efforts to provide relief assistance.

Refugee activities often involve truly desperate situations and large numbers of organizations, and require a multiplicity of simultaneous activities often ambivalently received by host governments. Consequently, the need for co-ordination is perhaps greater than in any other line of development assistance work.

The role of NGOs

The 'derivative' argument expressed earlier sounds quite convincing when applied to profit-making organizations whose only sources of support are bilateral and multilateral doors. However, it is popularly alleged that NGOs think and behave differently than profit-making organizations because they have the ability to see things from a viewpoint different from that of the public sector - and in their courage in giving voice to this difference. The apparent 'ability' and 'courage' stem in part from sources of funding separate from government, in part from their professed, primarily, humanitarian purpose and in part from the approach they normally take in providing assistance.

In fact, NGOs as a group have tried and been able to maintain considerable independence from donors over the last two decades. This suggests their 'co-ordination performance' could have been different, either better or worse, from that of profit-making organizations. However, there is some reason to believe that their record of co-ordinating activities is worse than that of other development agents.

ordination problems of NGOs providing refugee assistance. While recognizing that the root cause of the co-ordination problems may rest with donors, this paper argues, however, that there are still good reasons to focus attention on refugee work and the NGO role therein.

Refugee activities

While some of these factors apply to other forms of assistance, taken together, they make a convincing case for a refugee focus. Effective development assistance is usually a complicated undertaking: most development experts would agree that the set of political, economic, social, and environmental circumstances which lead to a refugee crisis require particularly taxing and ingenious remedies to resolve.

Refugee work, however, requires a phased, intergrated approach. The phasing involves moving from relief to rehabilitation to development, and in each phase there are a variety of activities that should be carried out simultaneously. Secondly, each phase requires commodities from both local and international sources. The procurement, shipping and effective use of these commodities requires tight management and often considerable co-ordination because of limited storage and transport infrastructure within the particular developing country.

Thirdly, refugee problems, because of the severity of human suffering and the international political implications, tend to receive far more media attention than other types of development problems. This in turn attracts a larger group of organizations offering assistance than is the case for other areas of development assistance work, and many of these organizations have limited experience in international relief work. Co-ordination is essential

One review of available evidence concluded that among NGOs, co-ordination is more the exception than the rule. Other studies have suggested NGOs perform better when they have marginal rather than major roles to play.

Part of this mediocre co-ordination record among NGOs might be explained by the wide spectrum of organizations that fall under the NGO heading. There are clearly large differences in internal motivations, outward objectives, capability and impact between, say, a small-self financed church group that has a handful of missionaries in developing countries, and a large (religious or non-religious) 'food freighter' that depends for support on media campaigns and government payments for the shipment and distribution of food aid. For instance, the annual budget of Catholic Relief Services is US \$430 million.

Moreover, some development experts claim that the differences among NGOs are greater than their similarities. Indeed, after looking at a number of NGOs, one expert, Tendler, wryly concluded that the only theme common to all of them may be the sameness of their claim that heterogeneity makes evaluation difficult. This author goes on, however, to list seven 'articles of faith' or maxims adhered to by most NGOs:

1. reaching and working with the poor;
2. emphasizing and participation of the poor
in decision-making;
3. initiating processes through which poor people
learn to gain control over their lives;
4. working directly with people rather than with
governments;

5. a willingness to be flexible and experiment;
6. a special ability to work with and strengthen local institutions;
7. low costs of operation.

Tendler drew up these articles of faith from interviews with a wide range of US private voluntary organizations (PVOs) claiming an advantage over profit-making organizations. If this list is representative of the characteristics of NGOs providing assistance in developing nations, it is an interesting one to reflect upon, both from the standpoint of its accuracy and its relevance to refugee work. Specifically, the fourth article will undoubtedly present problems in co-ordination.

There are several other reasons for giving particular attention to NGOs. Historically they have been the major participants in efforts to combat refugee problems. They have also held a privileged position among groups working in developing countries over the last two decades in the sense of not having been subjected to the frequent evaluations that other donor agents have had to endure. Consequently, there are very few thoughtful assessments of their activities.

Evidence concerning NGO refugee activities

Considerable study has recently been given to refugee activities in one country: Sudan. Rather than co-ordination, what stands out are the various forms of counter-productive behaviour from a wide variety of refugee bodies. These include:

1. squabbles among regular line ministries over regulations to be applied to refugees and donors assisting them;
2. redundant services/commodities in some areas and no services/commodities in others;

3. donor agencies competing with government institutions for power and control over refugee programmes;
4. NGOs using destructive tactics to maintain their 'market share' in refugee activities and territories;
5. reluctance of donors and NGOs to use qualified local personnel despite personnel shortages;
6. different policies applied by refugee agencies on whether locals should be paid or asked to do certain types of work voluntarily;
7. unreasonable NGO rigidity regarding appropriate refugee activity.

There is no point in discussing sordid details beyond illustrating how these issues have contributed to co-ordination problems. The squabbles among ministries involved in such incidents as a ministry of finance insisting that commodities imported for refugee relief should be taxed. There were also arguments over which land areas should be set aside for refugees and which ministries should have jurisdiction over refugee activities. In certain instances, these issues were resolved after some time had elapsed; in others no resolution was reached and serious co-ordination problems developed.

Because the work of the many refugee agencies had not been effectively co-ordinated, there were some refugee areas that received more commodity and service support than was needed, while others suffered serious deficits. It is not hard to imagine how this happened. A large number of agencies bring in commodities and personnel to help deal with the refugee crisis. In even the best of circumstances, the absence of a clear line of command regarding deployment could lead to problems. When added to this is the concern

of some refugee agencies to obtain credit and media coverage for their work, the problems become more serious: some geographical areas and functional activities, for example, are more amenable to media coverage than others.

Corruption and incompetence are always cited by outsiders as reasons for not integrating their development work with that of the host-country government. The temptation in refugee work is to go even further and take control of all refugee operations. As has been well-documented in the literature, there are two reasons for this: host-country ambivalence regarding refugees and the lack of a clear line of command for such work within the host-country's governmental structure. While understandably tempting, it is extremely short-sighted and grossly unrealistic to think a country will cede control over significant refugee activities for any length of time to outside agents. During the period of governmental attempts to regain control, co-ordination problems are inevitable.

It was somewhat unexpected to find evidence that NGO's tried to 'stake out' geographical and functional areas for themselves in Sudan. NGO's engaging in such activities demonstrate by their actions a lack of regard for co-ordination. Indeed, such behaviour reminds one of the monopolistic practices of large businesses intending to protect their markets from competitors.

Finally, the unwillingness of outside agencies to employ qualified local personnel in the presence of personnel shortages is in itself a co-ordination problem. The same can be said for agencies using different policies regarding what constitutes paid or volunteer work. Failure to co-ordinate such work policies has frequently been the death-knell for any form of voluntary work. NGO rigidity on

appropriate refugee activity is also by definition a co-ordination problem.

Root causes

Many of the factors identified above that contribute to co-ordination problems have been amply discussed in the literature. The issue for policy makers is whether these factors, taken together, represent insurmountable obstacles to effective and co-ordinated refugee assistance.

The problems that have resulted from failure to co-ordinate are simply too obvious and blatant for it to be believed that they occurred because participants in key refugee activities were unaware of the need to co-ordinate their activities. Clearly, other forces were at work.

Differing objectives

When the differing agendas of the organizations and individuals involved in development activities are systematically considered, it is somewhat remarkable to find that these activities ever have a positive impact. Differing agendas present even more formidable barriers to positive results in refugee work.

There are obvious ambivalences felt and expressed by host-country governments about refugee activities. Internal politics dictate a concern that refugees should not be perceived to be receiving more favourable treatment than citizens living in poverty. When the refugees come across the border from countries that are suspected of supporting anti-government political and military activities, matters become even more problematic.

Bilateral donors also consider factors other than humanitarian

concerns when contemplating refugee assistance, particularly when the assistance would go to refugees from 'unfriendly' countries. Donors are pressured by their agri-business industries and NGOs who benefit monetarily from shipping and distributing food. There is also pressure from citizens of western nations who are increasingly exposed to the plight of refugees through the media. It is not easy to predict the results of these pressures, but it is easy to see how they will create problems when the donors are faced with the task of coordinating their activities with those of others.

Unlike development assistance where most of the financial support comes from bilateral and multilateral donors, a significant portion of refugee activities is financed by voluntary contributions to NGOs. These NGOs are accountable to their contributors for the uses of these monies, and it is unlikely that their charters will fit perfectly with the highest priority need in any particular refugee situation. Since many of the NGOs also draw a significant portion of their resources from public donors, they often find themselves under conflicting pressures.

Incompetence and poor management practices

Refugee work is extremely complex: to be successful it requires integrated activities that are properly sequenced. Given the logistical problems involved in developing countries, good managers are essential. At the same time, refugee work is extremely demanding psychologically. There is little chance that persons possessing the required management talents will also be equipped to deal psychologically with refugee settings for extended periods of time.

One question facing policy-makers is whether NGOs are better

equipped to manage refugee problems than other participants in the development assistance industry. There are several reasons to suggest that they are not. Firstly, good managers with international experience are in short supply, and private firms pay very well to attract them. NGOs as a group do not pay well, suggesting they will only be able to compete for management talent with non-monetary rewards. There are certainly good managers who are attracted to NGOs, but the low pay places limitations on how many good managers they can attract for work in refugee areas.

Nevertheless, the management performance of NGOs could conceivably be better than others for as yet unconsidered reasons. In order to consider this possibility, a computer run was examined that provided summaries of evaluations undertaken over the last five years (1980-85) on all US Agency for International Development sponsored projects that were NGO managed. The implementation problems encountered by NGOs were the same as those encountered by a wide sample of donor agents. In short, it appears that NGOs, like all other donor agents, perform poorly in implementing donor-sponsored projects. Inadequate coordination is just one of the implementation problems of NGOs. Given the available evidence, there is no justification for singling out NGOs to undertake the demanding implementation of refugee projects.

Tighter management administrative processes

Refugee co-ordination problems will continue until their root causes are addressed. The word addressed rather than eliminated is used because there is little chance that the differing agendas of the major refugee bodies can be significantly altered. In such circumstances, the best that can be done is to establish a process to neutralize the negative effects of the differing agendas. This process should be used in all new refugee activities and introduced into on-going refugee activities.

From the outset, all organizations desirous of playing a role in the refugee effort should be required to attend weekly meetings. Failure to attend these meetings on a regular basis would disqualify an organization from playing an active role in the refugee work. While such an organization could contribute financially or in kind to the refugee effort, it would not have a say in determining how their contributions would be used.

The initial purpose of these meetings would be to establish a country-led consortium to develop an overall refugee strategy and a plan for its implementation. The strategy should outline what refugee activities are needed and how they would relate to the country's on going development activities. Possible co-ordination problems between development activities and refugee activities should be anticipated, and the strategy should indicate how they would be resolved. An appendix to the strategy should specify all current or planned development/refugee activities.

The plan should be specific regarding what needs to be done, the role of each organization in carrying out the plan, and a time

schedule for its enactment. It should establish a command structure and a reporting system to provide support for that structure. In countries where governments are not willing or capable to take immediate control, the plan should spell out how control will devolve to the host government. While the structure will have to be customized for each situation, its primary characteristics should be a strong, central management/control mechanism with flexibility at the local level for implementation.

A refugee plan is never finished: because circumstances frequently change in ways that cannot be anticipated, a good plan is necessarily open to development. Changes must be monitored and as new information comes in and is analysed, the plan should be up-dated. The way to ensure that all refugee bodies are aware of the changes taking place is to require them to be in regular attendance at the meetings. The above steps should be a sina qua non for refugee work.

Performance versus institution-building

There is a danger that in focusing on performance, donors will continue to disregard developing national-institutions and further postpone the day on which these are competent to manage their own affairs. A number of writers have been troubled by this conflict between the demand for immediate programme performance and the longer term need for strong developing institutions: while criticizing outsiders for usurping the role of the host in managing refugee programmes, I do not suggest that the Sudanese could assume management without enormous problems. But they will never begin to tackle them under present approaches to assistance.

Building strong developing country organizations should take

precedence over maintaining or improving on refugee activity performance. This value judgement will not appeal to those who place priority on short term humanitarian goals. However, in the long term, strong African institutions should reduce the number of refugees and make the governments of developing countries more willing to accept refugee assistance from others.

The implications of this position are that a high priority should be given to the indigenization of refugee assistance through: putting more resources into the training of local personnel; increasing the recruitment of qualified local personnel; and going further with efforts to empower host governments to actually manage the programme.

If and when this is done, there may continue to be examples of incompetence, corruption, and unnecessary deaths. Yet it has to be remembered that having an outside donor take charge of the situation is not a long term solution.

Increased and broader evaluation activities

Most evaluative work that has been done on refugee assistance has focused on entirely donor-financed projects. Other refugee activities need to be evaluated. Evaluation activities should broaden out to encompass the entire refugee effort. The past evaluation work has been too project-specific and as a consequence has missed many of the most serious co-ordination problems.

Improved processes for selecting organizations

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other refugee activity sponsors should develop and use objective criteria to determine which organizations are qualified for and capable of carrying out refugee work. Considerable weight should be given to the capacity to manage complex activities under most difficult

circumstances. In this regard, there is no apparent reason to favour NGOs over other organizations for such work.