

NDRF SUMMARY

Humanitarian Policy Group

Time to let go: Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era

SUMMARY

On April 12, the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) released a major report providing critical reflections on the current humanitarian system.

Time to let go: Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era (visit [report](#) or [NDRF site](#) for more) argues that humanitarianism faces a crisis of legitimacy in many operational contexts. Humanitarians' lack of legitimacy with local actors reduces its effectiveness in relieving suffering and responding to need – that is, fulfilling the humanitarian imperative. The reason for this crisis of legitimacy is cultural; major Western-based humanitarian agencies are one part of a broader universe of assistance made up of actors from multiple traditions and cultures of care. However, Western-dominated humanitarian system privileges Western-based actors and cultural-specific values at the expense of others. This report explores this cultural complexity within global humanitarianism, and recommends how the Western-dominated gatekeepers of humanitarian principles and approaches must change to better accommodate this diversity.

Given this structural crisis, the report calls on traditional western-based humanitarian actors to *let go* – let go of the privileges and prejudices through which their power and control in humanitarianism is preserved, and other important stakeholders are excluded. Let go of the bureaucratic, risk-averse incentive structures – perpetuated by donors – that preference large, western-based agencies at the expense of small, local actors; let go of the false divisions that separate emerging disaster responders from the NGO gatekeepers of the traditional humanitarian space. Some of the more notable recommendations include:

For 'traditional' humanitarians:

- UN and INGOs need to become **enablers** of locally-led responses, rather than direct implementers.
- The IASC (Inter-Agency Standing Committee) as the paramount coordination body should **bring non-traditional organisations into its ranks**.
- Humanitarians must be **honest** in their approach:
 - Honesty in acknowledging the limits of what humanitarianism, traditionally defined, can achieve. This means a willingness to work with development organisations and sharing the humanitarian space with others, who, although

may not be 'card-carrying' humanitarians, may be better positioned to help - especially in protracted crises; and

- Honesty in acknowledging that Western relief agencies espousing a rights-based agenda cannot also claim to be humanitarians – a label that can and should only apply to those strictly adhering to classic principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity.

For donors:

- Shift behaviors and incentive structures by **opening funding to local NGOs**. A global financial instrument to provide predictable and flexible funding would help in this respect.
- Donors need to reward organisations that **work effectively together, take risks, innovate** and take on lessons learned.

CID ANALYSIS – WHY CARE?

World Humanitarian Summit (WHS)

The first World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul just around the corner (May 23-24, 2016). The ODI report flags and reiterates many of the concerns and associated recommendations up for discussion at the Summit - many of the specific recommendations are identical to those highlighted in the Secretary General's report and will be at the heart of the agenda-setting discussion in Istanbul. In particular, the ODI report sets out a series of structural changes designed to shift humanitarianism towards stronger local / Southern engagement at the front end of humanitarian response – through the revision of established principles, financing, programme and partnership structures. ODI's approach – privileging a cultural relativist 'classicist' interpretation of humanitarianism (where humanitarian legitimacy is confined to strict adherence and application of the principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity) is at direct odds with the avowed approach of many rights-based organisations.

The report's positions and proposals will likely resonate with many Southern governments and civil society participants. We should expect to see these arguments and this report inform discussions at the Summit in May, and the emerging humanitarian agenda over the next decade.

NDRF members should consider the criticisms at the heart of the report; we need to reflect collectively on how the New Zealand humanitarian community should respond to the new directions proposed.

Time to let go... we know

While the report adopts a provocative tone, the analysis and recommendations are themselves not particularly novel. Critical analysis of the dominant 'Western-centric' humanitarian international, and the tension between strict adherents of first humanitarian principles and later generations of rights-based approaches to humanitarian action are well-worn (De Waal, Barnett, Duffield, Smillie, etc.). Though the report points to deep structural problems in the current humanitarian system and the changing nature of crises themselves, it also highlights the numerous efforts afoot in the humanitarian sector to react and respond to them (Chapter 2), including with a range of new emerging actors (diasporas, private sector, local disaster responders). Moreover, the recommendations are also largely recycled from other existing analysis, and are modestly technical in scope.

This suggests that the problems – and indeed humanitarian resistance to addressing them - may not be as 'deep-seeded' as the report tries to suggest.

How do we separate the 'good' local from the 'bad' local?

Where the report makes its most strident (if familiar) critique is around enduring power structures within the existing humanitarian order. The report calls out those traditional humanitarian 'insiders' (donors, UN, large INGOs) who set and maintain the rules, standards and terms of access to funding (the IASC symbolic of the elitist clubhouse mentality of the system). It proposes steps to bring more local and non-traditional actors in, and to embrace the distinct cultural traditions of care that have inspired them. Broadened inclusivity is good. However, while providing a genealogical account of the Western humanitarian tradition, the report does not provide guidance as to what should be done with the professionalized system of standards, good practice and guidelines that now define the sector.

The Sphere Project, Core Humanitarian Standard, IFRC Code and others have grown out of an acknowledgment that relief, improperly conceived or executed, can do harm.

While humanitarianism should embrace a wider community of actors – and find ways to broaden the discussion around principles that should govern humanitarian action that draws from different cultural horizons - it is right to define and enforce standards that will exclude those who would do harm. The trick is developing a model that integrates and engages these different cultural horizons. On this critical front, the report offers no recommendations.